Education or Neo-colonialism?

Comparing the historical and educational situations of Australian Aboriginals and African Americans students

Summary: *We now know that the purpose of the education of those societies conquered by the Europeans after 1492 was to replace their values, culture--and especially their language--with those of the colonizers. This paper reviews the past and current schooling approaches of the Australian government which Aboriginal citizens consider colonial and poses the question: does this assimilationist agenda continue today, in a neo-colonial form, with African American students in our urban schools?*

A report from:
The 14th Annual International Democratic Education Conference

July 10-19, 2006
Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Hosted by:
Australian Association of Progressive and Alternative Education
www.idec2006.org

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Education is never neutral, it either colonizes or liberates. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.   ~ Paulo Freire

"Education is indoctrination if you're white—subjugation if you're black."
                                    ~ James Baldwin

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Introductory Vocabulary

education: educate from Latin ēdūcere, present active infinitive of ēdūcō; to draw out, to draw forth or bring out, as something potential or latent

schooling: represented by the "banking system" which refers to the metaphor of students as empty containers which educators must deposit knowledge into; the students are not called upon to understand, but to memorize the knowledge (and answers) given by the teacher

colonialism: (org. 1850) the control or governing influence of a nation over a dependent country, territory, or people; the system or policy by which a nation maintains or advocates such control or influence

neo-colonialism: (org. 1955) the dominance of strong nations over weak nations, not by direct military and political control (as in traditional colonialism), but by the economic, cultural, and educational policies which indirectly maintain its influence

The welcome to Australia by Dr. Dennis Foley

The 2006 International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) began with a welcome from Dr. Dennis Foley who talked about the problems Aboriginal students had/have with Australian public education. Himself an Aboriginal, he spoke of a few independent schools that are successful because they educate students in their own self-interests and encourage students to share in school/curriculum decisions, helping make sure the school respects their culture.

He expressed concern with the Australian government's attempts to rewrite national history. He went through a list of names of famous Indigenous persons hidden from the current national curriculum. He mentioned the Acacia Ridge independent school in Brisbane as an example of a curriculum that respects Indigenous history. He noted that the graduation rate for Aboriginal peoples is 25%. The *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* and the *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues* were mentioned as examples of publications that one could trust to give the Indigenous perspective.

RELEVANCE/APPLICATION

Indigenous peoples and Australian Public Education
Dr. Foly's talk is a reminder of Beresford's (2004) research where he showed the educational disadvantage and alienation reflected a broader problem of social marginalization of Indigenous youth. Beresford went beyond the traditional factors that attempted to explain why Indigenous youth failed to graduate:

1. School-based issues such as language and curriculum, teacher attitudes and school responsiveness to Indigenous culture; and,
2. Environmental factors such as low income, racism, poor employment prospects.

Beresford proposes 2 more constructs to fill an important gap in understanding the issue:

3. Trans-generational disadvantage

Widespread denial of access to mainstream education and ideas about the inherent inferiority of Indigenous people led educators to believe that they could not be educated within a Western system beyond elementary level. If and when mainstream education was made available, it occurred in a segregated and inferior manner. As mainstream education was more widely provided, in return students were expected to adopt the dominant culture's values, attitudes and aspirations. In this case, they were those influenced by white European culture.

This exposure to assimilation was seen as "alien" to Indigenous students because it placed emphasis on Western learning styles and status quo social attitudes while perpetuating and reinforcing cultural attitudes of superiority/inferiority among staff and students and their families.

Public schools are an extension of Australian society's past and present economic/ social exclusion, segregated schools and neighborhoods, and inequalities in employment, health, criminal justice, and housing. These negative experiences and attitudes of parents and extended family are passed down through generations on to children in the form of anti-intellectualism and low aspirations.

4. Trauma

The "reality of psycho-social dominance by the colonizers (dominate culture) who engaged in cultural/spiritual genocide driven by the view that Indigenous were non-persons, over time caused them to believe this about themselves." To survive, over the generations, Indigenous peoples had to suppress/deny their feelings of inferiority, distress, and despair. These were internalized within the family and across generations, and expressed in destructive behaviors and rejection of education by the young.

In many instances, Indigenous youth adopt an oppositional identity—schools are seen as the domain of whites and means of colonization. Also, they have not developed the resilience needed to do well in a competitive system. Doing poorly at public school becomes a 'shame job.' Students see themselves as losers who are processed, defined, and recycled within the mechanisms of the system. Their existence as persons becomes devalued and they become targets of reform or exclusion (Beresford, p. 12).

Similarities to the United States of America and the world

This scenario sounds very similar to the experiences of American Indigenous (Mondale and Patton, 2001), and some working class whites (Finn, 1999). Although public schools promised to be a source of success for blacks, in many instances they found schools to be a source of self-doubt rather than self-development (Hamovitch, 1990).

American educators must see that resistance to schooling by certain groups is not a quirk or isolated phenomenon, but a global reaction by youth to public education (Sewell, 1997) and school authority (Willis, 1977) that seeks to educate them not in their own self-interests, but in the interests of the dominate culture.

> "I failed your class 'cause I ain't with your reasoning. You tryin' to make me you…"
> -- Boogie Down Productions, 1989

This is why in 2003 various educators at the global level, concerned with increasing school dropout rates in all countries, published the first of its kind: *The International Journal of School Disaffection*.

Framing traditional American urban education from a global perspective

To understand the current failure of urban schools (Holzman, 2006) to educate all students, it has been necessary to frame this in terms of widespread global school disaffection and growing awareness of the history of the global use of public schools not to educate, but as a political tool to assimilate, acculturate, and acclimate minorities and the working-class for the benefit of the mainstream culture. In order to affect change American urban educators must be shown that the rejection of the assimilationist definition of public education by their so-called urban minority and working-class students is not an isolated phenomenon. In fact, this is a psychologically healthy response to urban public schools that attempt to persuade urban youth to deny their own experiences and common sense (Hamovitch, 1990).

> "Education is indoctrination if you're white—subjugation if you're black."
> – James Baldwin

The entire issue of last November's *Phi Delta Kappan* concerned, "A New World View: Education In a Global Era," In it, educator Dr. Suarez-Orozco (2005) writes from a post-colonial, post-modern global viewpoint that is not tainted by the politics of 20th century American schools. His ideas are a welcomed world perspective of the purpose of education, and so of American public schools in the 21st century.

> Children growing up today are more likely than in any other generation to face a life of working, networking, loving, and living with others from different national, linguistic, religious, and racial background. The Tensta classroom (a model school in Sweden that has a multi-class/multi-national student body) is a microcosm of the classrooms of tomorrow. Students are challenged to engage and work through competing and contrasting cultural models and social practices, adjusting to and accommodating differences in such areas as kinship, gender, language, and the complicated interrelationship of race, ethnicity, and inequality. Trans-cultural communication, understanding, and empathy and collaboration are no longer ideals. *It is not as simple as the one-way assimilation and accommodation of ethnic, racial, linguistic, and religious minorities learning the codes of the majority society in order to get along and get ahead* (p. 211).

Americans know the drawbacks, as well as the advantages of assimilation; this is the "melting pot" scenario they grew up with. What is interesting is the many minorities who are assimilated and so have been rewarded with power, who either from pressure to say so, or because they actually believe assimilation and accommodation into the majority is necessary to be successful, push this on urban minorities and working-class families and their children.

Yet, many students know there is no pay off for them in this one-way conformity and they reject this paradigm and its politics. Instead, they want to be educated in their own self-interest, to be "educated" to be who they are. They want a personalized, customized education, not a one-size-fits-all model. They want an education as is defined in the root of the word educate: "educe." This means to "draw out," not fill in with the "…codes of the majority society in order to get along and get ahead." They know this is phony. They want to be authentic. They want to self-actualize. They want to be true to themselves and want educators to respect their language, culture, sensibilities, and who they are.

Hip hop culture and authenticity

In American this is epitomized by hip hop culture. Born out of the post-1960s attempt to clarify what it means to be urban and black, hip hop has been a major catalyst for the issues of black culture, especially today's generation of youth.

Black people in America were left no choice but to reinvent themselves. With no tenable link to Africa and the desire to distance themselves from their enslavers, blacks have continued to create and recreate forms of cultural expression and thus personal identity.

> "Self-actualization is the intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism, or more accurately, of what the organism is."   -- Abraham Maslow

In the 70s, hip hop artists felt they had a responsibility to recognize what or who was "fronting," (faking) to recognize it within themselves as well, and to keep going until they discovered their own authentic or the "intrinsic" self that Maslow describes. Hip-hop is about "Keepin' it real" vs. "busters," "perpetrators," "wanna be's," or "fakes." In the understanding of the hip hop nation as a family, others who do not fit the true "b-boy" (hip hop) mold, are considered to be inauthentic and disrespectful imitators. Verbal battles between M.C.'s (rappers) began when it was perceived that someone wasn't being true to themselves, or "true to the game" (Brady, 2000).

And remember, all of this is done to the backdrop of the history and politics of race in America where identity formation was and continues to be influenced by the insanity of white supremacy's "one drop rule" (Malcomson, 2000).

Unfortunately, due to generational, culture, and class differences, in many urban schools the repression of this urban black identity is a daily matter of fact.

> "The cultural disconnect between the civil rights generation and the hip-hop generation is perhaps the single most important challenge in reaching black youth who are simply not motivated, interested, or inspired by school reform efforts in which their urban identities are not represented."
>
> -- Dr. Shawn Ginwright, *Black in school*

This in tragic because if urban educators saw the promise of hip hop culture as the genuine efforts of this generation to clarify who they are, they would validate and affirm black youth identity and in so doing think of urban youth culture as an asset, not a liability (Ginwright, 2004). In doing so they would not only help give urban black youth a strong and healthy personal sense of "self" and group/cultural identity, but make urban schools work for students and help America live up to its potential.

> "While progressive hip-hop culture functions as the voice of resistance for America's black youth, it also provides a blueprint for the possibilities of positive social change for the entire society—helping America live up to its promise of liberty and justice for all."
>
> -- Dr. Shawn Ginwright, *Black in school*

The issue here is: The forces (both black and white) within our public schools see leaving one's culture behind (as though it were somehow, according to the deficit model of education, deficient) and/or adopting the dominant culture, as the answer to schooling, social, and economic/employment problems.

However, when viewed in the present reality of a global consciousness, according to Dr. Suarez-Orozco, assimilationism is merely one part of the problem of how to make schools work for both individuals and for society. Education as passive conformity, in order to fit in, it's not the total answer that it is presented to be. This is in stark contrast to the oppositional nature of hip-hop culture, a culture that arises out of the need for authenticity and self-actualization. Basically, many black (and white) urban students who identify with the values of hip hop culture do now want to pay the price to "get along and get ahead." (See Prof. Akom's (2003) arguments in, "Assessing the costs and benefits of not "'playing the game.'")

Can US urban schools acquire this global level of sophistication?
American urban school districts cannot model/support this level of global sophistication if we continue to see success as something that comes through "…the one-way assimilation and accommodation of ethnic, racial, linguistic, and religious minorities learning the codes of the majority society in order to get along and get ahead."

Would it not be helpful to urban minorities and working-class students to be respected, treated, and viewed through global standards? Are they not smart enough, or good enough to be on par with other students around the world? Or is it the lack of sophistication and foresight, coupled with the fear by assimilated minorities of loosing all they have gained (Meacham, 2000) which keeps 20th century-oriented urban school boards and educators from democratizing education by celebrating difference?

For those who want to assimilate, fine; but, for those who do not, why discourage new and innovative ways to succeed beyond the lines of the traditional? In fact, why not enable, in our youth, the

creativity, boldness, and heart it takes to be who you are and do things differently. This is what America is about. Conformity limits innovativeness.

> "The duty of a citizen is not to fit into society, but make society."
> -- John Holt

Democratic education, as explained in this report, is the way around the limiting and debilitating traditional purpose of public education as a common school to create America's melting pot.

American middle class European-based culture can no longer be the only standard. In a global, flat world, urban educators have to expand. Why not set up curricula that respects the cultures, languages and grammar, and sensibilities of the minority as well as the majority—that encourages and fosters an education that teaches the history, depth/breadth, quality, and power of each culture, enabling students to finesse in both American worlds…and on to the global village.

Indigenous Academic Journals: De-colonizing research and society
Mr. Foley's mentioning of the *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* and the *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues* was purposeful. If we review *De-colonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, by researcher and Aboriginal Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1995), it is easier to see why he mentioned these publications.

From the vantage point of the colonized, the term 'research' is inextricably linked with European colonialism; the ways in which scientific research has been implicated in the worst excesses of imperialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples.

De-colonizing methods critically examine the historical and philosophical base of traditional (Western) research. They take into account the different ways in which imperialism is embedded in disciplines of knowledge and methodologies as 'regimes of truth.' They re-examine such concepts as 'discovery,' 'claiming' and 'naming' through which the West has incorporated and continues to incorporate the indigenous world within its own web. Smith examines the various western paradigms, academic traditions and methodologies, which continue to position the indigenous as 'Other'. Her efforts will help in reclaiming control over indigenous ways of knowing and being. She shows, with respect to the decolonization of research methods, 'When indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed' (Library of Congress, 1999).

Similarities to the African-American community and urban public schools
The issues and concerns brought to light by researcher Linda Smith are similar to those of many Americans. As is the case in Australia, historically, the majorities in the United States have taken advantage of so-called minorities through controlling knowledge—how it is obtained, defined, and distributed. The following are common concerns and relevant remarks:

- *Her concerns about "research":* How, via the Eugenics Movement, scientific research was used to "prove" the innate inferiority of certain groups which had a negative influence on public education for these same groups;

- *Her concern about the issues with "discovery," "claiming," and "naming" through which the status quo via the public schools has incorporated, and continues to incorporate the minority's world within its own web*: The co-opting black music or inventions, discouraging the use of Black English/Ebonics;

> "If Black English is not a language, what is?"
> -- James Baldwin, author

- *Her concern with issue with reclaiming control over ways of knowing and being; dealing with various western paradigms, academic traditions and methodologies, which continue to position the so-called minorities as "Other"; and, the transformative power, yet challenging power, of academic studies when so-called minorities become the researchers and not merely the researched*: The efforts of African-American teachers can overcome western paradigms, traditions, and methods in public schools by using cultural knowledge, via liberatory and emancipatory pedagogy, as a form of discourse (Gordon, 1994). Situations similar to Indigenous scholars are reflected in American black intellectuals' efforts to achieve freedom from European-centered constructions of knowledge and to counter the abnormal scrutiny by the academic status quo of their social oriented research (Carruthers, 1994).

Is colonization still practiced today in the United States of America?
Perhaps, we do not see ourselves as colonized. But, Mari Evans (2006) does. This trusted Indianapolis native and member of the so-called "minority community" has reason to see America as colonized and its institutions, media, public schools/educators as colonizers.

In "A Cursory Study of Sophisticated Systems of Private Sector and State Controls," (subtitled: Systemic Racism as Experienced by African-Americans in the U.S.), Evans clearly illustrates how colonialism is not dead. Her outline in 3 sections covers exactly how colonization takes place:

I. Area of vulnerability and attack; The African-American Mind
   A. Define and identify the dominant or controlling groups, e.g. "Shakoes." Define, identify, and isolate (color, caste, or religion as determinate) the target population, e.g. "Blakes," (African-Americans).
   B. Change "Blakes" self-concept: Establish "Shakoes" as model.
   C. Substitute Shakoes values: Institute new forms of thought via the verbal and visual language of media.

II. Area of vulnerability and attack; The African-American Body
   A. Use superior force as integral part of the economic fabric: The implementation of power through mega-corporation ownership, and regulatory controls: low wages, job discrimination, availability of drugs and guns, police action, felons can't vote, imbalanced assignment ratios—medical experiments, hazardous jobs, and combat units.

III. Area of vulnerability and attack; The African-American Environment
   A. Uses of superior force (numerical strength) through the "democratic" political system; or, superior force as manifest in special interest exclusivity; or, the use of "capitalistic principles" that require funds or contracts the colonized rarely have; control of land ("eminent domain"), schools (property taxes), housing (redlining/predatory lending/high rent), mobility (public transportation/gas prices), health services (hospitals that require insurance), food supply (inferior foods at neighborhood   stores), the judiciary ("minorities" have little influence over Federal and high court appointees), or private enterprise (location, loan policies, insurance rates, competition with mega-corporations). Viewed through the frame poet Evans prepared, it is easy to see how America is kept from progressing beyond the 20th century. Yet, the majority of Americans would differ with this insight. Why? Perhaps it is clear to the colonized, not the colonizers.

Reexamining Resistance as Oppositional Behavior: A lesson for public schools
A.A. Akom (2003) studied a small group of female high school students who where members of the Nation of Islam (NOI). Their grades in school were very good. Prepared for school by NOI tutors and ministers, these students met as a group to do daily homework, complete semester assignments, and study for exams. They learned how to take class notes, outline reading assignments, write papers,

think critically, and defend their point of view. Due to the influence of the NOI, these students resisted assimilation in favor of cultural preservation. They acquired the ability to question their peers and teachers, the state curriculum, and the textbooks that supported it. They actively participated in classroom discussions. Many times they used their own facts and ideas from the discussions with the their tutor and readings suggested by other NOI members.

These young black women did not take on the adaptive coping strategies of many urban youth who equate doing well in school with assimilating into the dominant group, "acting white," and the consequent resistance to school and societal norms.

Get along to get ahead: Assessing the costs/benefits of not "playing the game"

Their behavior/attitudes were not completely oppositional nor completely assimilationist. The "dual frame of reference" and "resistance within accommodation and without assimilation" allowed them to resist "the cultural and linguistic patterns of the majority culture, yet embrace education achievement." They were not viewed as "acting white" because they were in fact constantly critiquing the dominant white culture—a culture both they and their peers believed the school represented.   The NOI helped these students to *"politicize their cultural resistance and develop counter-ideologies, while they assess the costs and benefits of not playing the game"* (p. 318).

Prof. Akom's work encourages "reinterpreting popular notions of resistance" that suggest that working-class students get working-class jobs because they refuse to develop skills, attitudes, manners, and speech that are necessary for achievement. Their oppositional/resistant behavior was "Transformative," rather than merely reproducing the normal situation in schools where resistant students--with their oppositional identity--get suspended or expelled, or they eventually quit, keeping them at the bottom of the social-economic ladder.

> Innovations occur precisely because they simultaneously engaged in structural assimilation (promoting traditional values such as hard work), separation (affirming their own racial and cultural identities), and resistance (challenging key tenets of the achievement ideology by not conforming or assimilating to school rules or social etiquette) and, at the same time understood the importance of academic achievement (p.319).

They did not go along and get along. Rather, their experiences were transformative because they were able to be "oppositional" while achieving academically.   Their success in school provided them the mobility to move up the social-economic ladder.

Will our public schools see themselves as colonizers and change?

It will take a major paradigm shift to make public school teachers see to what extent they are colonizing and schooling instead of educating. It will require them to take an honest look at themselves and their American society to give credence to Mari Evans' paradigm of colonization.

> "What are at-risk children at-risk of doing? In plain language, at-risk children are at-risk of turning the poverty and prejudice they experience against society rather than learning how to conform and take their 'proper' place. The children are malajusting, and it is their teacher's role to make that maladjustment functional and creative rather than to suppress it."
> -- Herbert Kohl, *I Won't Learn form You*

Ironically, most educators feel that have taken an honest look in the mirror and at their society.   As a result they have concluded that if so-called urban minority and working-class students are going to make it, they must conform to the rules--how to play the game. Thus, they feel they are necessary social agents, there to assimilate students, of course for their own good, into the mainstream. They easily encourage students to be like them: Go along to get along, follow the rules, be on time, and make good grades. You will graduate and get a good job. Then, follow the proper work ethics: be a good employee and be cooperative, punctual, honest, work hard, etc. (that's how they made it) and you will be rewarded.

> "We have to give respect to get it. Don't disrespect your teachers because you think they don't respect you. You don't run the place. So go along and get along."
> -- Superintendent Dr. Eugene White to high school students, Indianapolis Public Schools

Royster (2003), along with common sense and information gleaned from a day at the barber or beauty shop, disproves this formula. It works for the majority, but is hard to justify for minorities and urban working-class students.

> "Urban school reform must be viewed in context of urban poverty. This is difficult due to the socio-cultural everyday distances between educators and urban students."
> -- Shawn Ginwright, *Black in School*

<u>All education is political</u>

As graduation rates get worse, educators continue to look outside the system and themselves for causes. They do not see the importance of politics: *All schooling is political. It either colonizes, or it liberates.*

Because teachers are either politically native, or know better but do not act, or are simply incompetent with respect to teaching urban children, students are not formally made aware of the social-economical-historical-political context of which public schools are a part. And, for the many urban minorities who come to school politically conscious, and thus knowing where they stand in the hierarchy and why, they find a climate where they are more likely to be seen as oppositional—troublemakers who interfere with learning and need to be removed.

> "Black youth identity is constructed in resistance to public school education."
> -- Shawn Ginwright, *Black in School*

Putting all the above ideas and issues together, it is urgent that urban educators who teach in schools with large minorities and/or urban working-class populations must realize that if they are to get the support of these students, their families, and communities, they must reflect and work toward fulfilling the democratic vision of teaching for social justice. By creating critical thinkers and providing these critically thinking students the opportunities to act on their critiques, the school will begin to solve the very neighborhood problems, students face everyday, that influence school failure or success.

Simply stated, respecting the authentic identities and solving the day-to-day struggles of post-modern urban youth must be central in the development of any school reform strategy (Ginwright, 2004).

<u>To educators from those who fight the colonizing effects of our public schools</u>

- Schooling that was always intended to instill loyalty to and prepare so-called minorities to serve a social order that oppresses them must be rejected and replaced with a liberating education.
- Is success in school a simple matter of demonstrating one's ability to represent the interests of the status quo, a situation dominated by European-American elite social institutions?

    > "Can we call the preparation to produce the cultural hegemony of European-American elites, education?"   -- Mwalimu J. Shujaa

- Education is how to determine what is in one's own self-interests, and distinguish them from those of others. It is a process that reflects the interests of minorities as a culture and their history.
- True education, non-colonizing education, transmits to a society's minorities their values, beliefs, traditions, customs, rituals, and sensibilities along with why these must be sustained (Shujaa, 1994).

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Dennis Foley Gai-mariagal (Matrilineal) his father is a descendant of the Capertree/Turon River people, Wiradjuri. Dennis was a Lecturer at Koori Centre Sydney University and recently moved to Swinburn in Melbourne. Dennis' areas and interest include the ethnographic study of the Eora and Guring-gai peoples of the Sydney basin, Indigenous political and social study, racism in Australia, together with Indigenous poetry and contemporary art. (From www.idec2006.org)

http://learningalternatives.net/wp-content/uploads/legacy/IDEC_2006.pdf