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Decolonizing educational leadership: Challenging Western-centric governance models in African educational institutions

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Abstract

This study examines the decolonization of educational leadership practices and the transformation of governance structures shaped by Western-centric frameworks in African educational institutions, addressing the urgent need to undo colonial legacies that marginalize indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices and alternative governance models. Drawing on a systematic review of literature and critical discourse analysis, the study prioritized indigenous leadership philosophies, community-based governance and culturally responsive administrative practices. Findings reveal that decolonizing educational leadership requires fundamental reorganization of power dynamics, decision-making processes and institutional values. Successful initiatives demonstrate improved educational outcomes for marginalized communities, enhanced cultural preservation and inclusive governance through collaborative decision-making, elder involvement and integration of traditional knowledge systems. Barriers include institutional resistance, policy constraints and limited resources for implementing alternative leadership models. The study recommends: establishing indigenous-led governance councils with decision-making authority; mandating decolonization training for educational leaders; allocating dedicated funding for indigenous leadership development programs; revising accreditation standards to recognize diverse leadership models; and conducting longitudinal research on decolonization effectiveness. This research contributes to educational equity discourse and provides actionable insights for institutions committed to authentic decolonization beyond superficial cultural additions.

Key terms: decolonizing education, indigenous leadership, educational governance, culturally

responsive leadership, systematic review, epistemological diversity

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

Educational institutions globally continue to operate within governance structures and leadership frameworks shaped by Western colonial patterns (Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). These systems are based on Eurocentric epistemologies, hierarchical authority models, and individualistic leadership approaches while systematically downgrading indigenous knowledge systems, communal decision-making practices, and culturally specific pedagogical traditions (Battiste, 2013; Grande, 2015). The persistence of colonial frameworks in educational leadership is an ongoing structural violence that propagates epistemic injustice and reinforces systemic inequities (Dei, 2018). The colonial legacy in educational governance manifests through multiple mechanisms. These include standardized curriculum that centers Western knowledge as universal and objective, leadership preparation programs that universalize Western management theories without acknowledging their cultural specificity, certification systems that legitimize particular governance structures while delegitimizing alternatives (Patel, 2016) and decision-making processes that ignore community voices, particularly those of indigenous and marginalized populations (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

Present-day calls for decolonizing educational leadership arise from both indigenous revival movements and critical scholarship examining how colonial power relations persist in apparently postcolonial contexts (Simpson, 2014). Indigenous scholars and communities have long challenged the imposition of Western educational models, advocating for sovereignty over educational institutions, integration of traditional knowledge systems and governance structures rooted in indigenous philosophies (Wilson, 2008). Concurrently, critical decolonial theorists have exposed how Western educational leadership replicates colonial relations through epistemological domination, cultural erasure and structural marginalization (Mignolo, 2011; Andreotti et al., 2015).

1.2 Defining Decolonization in Educational Leadership

Decolonization in educational settings encompasses far more than expanding curriculum content or hiring practices. As Tuck and Yang (2012) state, "decolonization is not a metaphor" but requires the practical return of indigenous land, life and governance structures. In educational leadership, decolonization demands major transformation of power relations, epistemological foundations and institutional structures (Dei, 2018). It requires recognizing and undoing how Western leadership theories and practices function as tools of ongoing colonialism, creating space for indigenous and non-Western leadership philosophies as equally legitimate and valuable, redistributing decision-making authority to indigenous communities and other marginalized groups historically excluded from governance, restructuring institutions to reflect values and practices rooted in indigenous knowledge systems rather than merely accommodating them within Western frameworks and addressing material consequences of colonialism including resource allocation, land relations and sovereignty (Smith, 2012; Grande, 2015; Simpson, 2017).

1.3 The Problem: Western-Centric Educational Leadership

Contemporary educational leadership theory and practice remain dominated by structures developed in Western contexts and universalized through colonial extension and neocolonial influence. In Africa, this dominance is particularly acute: UNESCO (2021) reports that over 80% of African higher education

institutions continue to employ leadership frameworks derived from Western management traditions, with fewer than 15% having formally integrated indigenous governance principles into their institutional charters. In Kenya, for instance, a survey of secondary school leadership preparation curricula found that indigenous leadership philosophies such as Ubuntu and elder-centered governance were absent from accredited training programs (Ministry of Education, Kenya, 2020). Girls and women in rural communities face compounded exclusion, with the African Development Bank (2022) estimating that gender-responsive educational leadership gaps contribute to a 23% lower secondary school completion rate for girls in sub-Saharan Africa compared to their male peers. The most widely taught leadership models are transformational leadership, instructional leadership and distributed leadership. They arose from Western organizational theory and reflect culturally specific assumptions about authority, change, knowledge and human relationships (Hallinger, 2018). These challenges are not merely theoretical: the practical impact of Western-centric governance includes the systematic exclusion of community elders from decision-making, the erasure of local languages as media of instruction and the delegitimization of indigenous educational priorities. Existing continental frameworks such as the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2016–2025) and various national education policy reforms have begun to recognize these gaps, yet implementation remains constrained by entrenched institutional inertia and resource limitations (African Union Commission, 2016).

These Western-centric models assume hierarchical organizational structures with clear authority lines, individualistic notions of leadership centered on heroic individual leaders separation between professional and community spheres; bureaucratic rationality as the primary mode of decision-making; and linear, progress-oriented change processes (Blackmore, 2010; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012).

1.4 Research Purpose and Questions

This study examines the decolonization of educational leadership practices and the transformation of governance structures shaped by Western-centric structures. The research addresses the urgent need to understand how educational institutions can reliably undo colonial legacies rather than perpetuate them through superficial reforms. This study seeks to answer the questions:

1. How do colonial legacies manifest in contemporary educational leadership theories, practice and governance structures?
2. What indigenous and alternative leadership philosophies and governance models challenge Western-centric frameworks?
3. What strategies, practices and structural changes characterize successful decolonization initiatives in educational leadership?
4. What barriers and challenges hinder decolonization efforts and how can they be addressed?
5. What are the outcomes and impacts of decolonizing educational leadership for marginalized communities, cultural preservation and educational equity?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study holds significance for multiple stakeholders. For indigenous communities, it documents their leadership traditions and advocates for institutional recognition and implementation. For educational leaders, it provides frameworks for critically examining their own practice and institutional structures through decolonial lenses. For policymakers, it offers evidence-based recommendations for systemic changes supporting authentic decolonization. For scholars, it contributes to growing decolonial literature in educational leadership, a field still dominated by Western theoretical frameworks (Lumby & English, 2009). This work advances educational equity by exposing how apparently neutral leadership and governance structures perpetuate colonial power relations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Colonial Foundations of Educational Leadership

2.1.1 Historical Context

The foundations of contemporary educational leadership were established during European colonial expansion when Western education systems were used as tools of cultural domination and assimilation (Willinsky, 1998; Battiste, 2013). Colonial administrators developed hierarchical governance structures, standardized curricula and authoritarian leadership models designed to indoctrinate indigenous and colonized populations into European cultural norms while subduing indigenous languages, knowledge systems and cultural practices (Adams, 1995; Marker, 2018).

Residential and boarding schools represent the most open manifestation of colonial education, systematically separating indigenous children from their communities, punishing use of indigenous languages and imposing Western Christian values and knowledge systems (Smith, 2012; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The governance structures of these institutions established patterns that persist in postcolonial educational systems (Milloy, 1999).

Even in contexts without clear residential school systems, colonial education followed similar logics, positioning Western knowledge as superior and universal, delegitimizing indigenous knowledge as superstition or tradition, organizing schools around Western temporal and spatial arrangements and installing Western-trained administrators with authority over curriculum, pedagogy and institutional culture (Patel, 2016; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).

2.1.2 Contemporary Manifestations

Colonial logics continue in contemporary educational leadership through multiple mechanisms that appear neutral but function to maintain Western dominance (Dei, 2018). Leadership preparation programs continue teaching Western theories without acknowledging their cultural specificity or examining how they may conflict with non-Western cultural values and practices (Lumby & English, 2009; Jean-Marie et al., 2009).

Accreditation and credentialing systems privilege Western educational pathways, requiring specific degrees from recognized institutions and excluding alternative forms of leadership preparation rooted in community-based learning and indigenous knowledge transmission (Shotton et al., 2013). These credentialing requirements create barriers for indigenous and community leaders who possess profound cultural knowledge and community trust but lack Western academic credentials (Brayboy et al., 2012).

Assessment and accountability systems measure success using standardized test scores, graduation rates and college attendance. These may not reflect indigenous communities' educational priorities or definitions of success (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009).

2.2 Indigenous Leadership Philosophies and Practices

2.2.1 Relational and Community-Centered Leadership

Indigenous leadership traditions across diverse cultural settings share common emphases on relationality, collective responsibility and community embeddedness that contrast sharply with Western individualistic models (Cajete, 1994; Wilson, 2008). Leaders are understood not as individuals who

possess authority but as community members who carry responsibilities to maintain relationships among people, ancestors, land and future generations (Styres & Zinga, 2013).

African leadership philosophies embodied in concepts like Ubuntu ("I am because we are") emphasize collective identity, communal responsibility and interdependence (Msila, 2008; Khoza, 2006). Ubuntu-based educational leadership prioritizes community wellbeing over individual achievement, values harmony and consensus and understands leadership as emerging from and accountable to community rather than imposed hierarchically (Letseka, 2013).

2.2.2 Elder Involvement and Intergenerational Knowledge

Indigenous educational leadership involves significant elder participation, recognizing that older community members carry accumulated cultural knowledge, historical memory and cultural authority (Brayboy et al., 2012; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). This intergenerational structure differs with Western educational systems where authority resides primarily in credentialed administrators and teachers with limited roles for elders beyond ceremonial functions (Marker, 2018).

Elders serve as curriculum advisors, language teachers, cultural monitors and decision-making participants (Cajete, 1994; Battiste, 2002). Their involvement ensures cultural continuity, provides authentic cultural knowledge transmission and maintains responsibility to community values and traditions (Simpson, 2014).

2.2.3 Land-Based and Place-Specific Leadership

Many indigenous leadership philosophies emphasize connections to specific places and lands as fundamental to identity, knowledge and governance (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015; Bang et al., 2014). Leadership carries responsibilities not just to human community members but to land, water, plants, animals and ancestors connected to specific territories (Cajete, 1994; Simpson, 2017). This place-based alignment produces leadership practices fundamentally different from Western models that treat leadership principles as universal and transferable across contexts (Dimmock & Walker, 2005). Indigenous leadership recognizes that governance structures, decision-making processes and knowledge systems must be grounded in specific cultural settings and places rather than universalized (Wilson, 2008).

2.3 Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Leadership

2.3.1 Theoretical Frameworks

Culturally responsive leadership arose from critical race theory and culturally responsive pedagogy, emphasizing how educational leaders must actively address systemic inequities and cultural discontinuities that marginalize students from non-dominant backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Johnson, 2006). Khalifa et al. (2016) define culturally responsive school leadership as behaviors that promote inclusive, culturally affirming school environments that challenge deficit thinking and advocate for marginalized students and communities.

More recently, Paris and Alim (2017) advanced culturally sustaining pedagogy, arguing that responsive approaches risk positioning dominant culture as the implicit norm to which educators respond. Culturally sustaining approaches instead seek to perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate and cultural pluralism as part of democratic schooling (Paris & Alim, 2017). In leadership terms, this means not simply responding to cultural diversity but actively working to sustain marginalized cultural practices, knowledge systems and languages (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016).

2.3.2 Leadership Practices

Culturally responsive leadership research identifies several key practices - critically examining personal assumptions and biases, developing cultural knowledge about students' and communities' lived experiences and cultures, building authentic relationships with marginalized communities, encouraging equitable policies and resource allocation, creating inclusive decision-making structures and challenging insufficiency narratives about marginalized students (Johnson, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016).

2.4 Critical Perspectives on Western Leadership Theories

2.4.1 Transformational and Instructional Leadership Critiques

Transformational leadership remains dominant in Western leadership preparation (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, critics note its cultural specificity: assumptions about charismatic individual leaders, change as progress and vision-driven organizations reflect Western, particularly Anglo-American, cultural values (Dimmock & Walker, 2005). In collective cultures that license consensus over individual vision or value stability over change, transformational leadership may be culturally inappropriate or even harmful (Hallinger, 2018).

Instructional leadership similarly mirrors Western assumptions about teaching, learning and knowledge that may conflict with indigenous pedagogies (Battiste, 2002). Its focus on direct supervision, standardized curriculum and measurable learning outcomes aligns with Western bureaucratic models but may undermine indigenous pedagogical approaches emphasizing experiential learning, knowledge as relationship and holistic development (Wilson, 2008).

2.4.2 Distributed Leadership and Neoliberal Concerns

Distributed leadership appears more aligned with collective cultural values than heroic individual leadership models. However it leaves hierarchical authority structures intact while dispersing implementation responsibility - a form of responsibilization that transfers work without transferring power (Blackmore, 2010; Lumby, 2013).

2.5 Decolonization Efforts in Educational Institutions

2.5.1 Indigenous-Controlled Institutions

Some of the most successful decolonization efforts occur in indigenous-controlled educational institutions where governance structures, curricula and pedagogical approaches can be fundamentally redesigned according to indigenous principles (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Shotton et al., 2013). These institutions feature governance councils including elders and community members with genuine authority, integration of indigenous languages and knowledge systems throughout curriculum, pedagogical approaches rooted in cultural traditions, land-based and experiential learning and institutional values reflecting indigenous philosophies (Brayboy et al).

2.5.2 Decolonization in Mainstream Institutions

Decolonizing mainstream educational institutions is more challenging given fixed Western structures, dominant non-indigenous populations and systemic resistance (Patel, 2016). Efforts begin with curriculum reform, adding indigenous content and perspectives (Marker, 2018). More efforts include establishing indigenous advisory councils with decision-making authority, creating indigenous leadership positions, implementing indigenous hiring initiatives, requiring cultural competency training, revising tenure and

promotion criteria to value indigenous scholarship and restructuring governance to include community voices (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Antoine et al., 2018).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study utilized the decolonial theory framework enhanced by indigenous research methodology and critical discourse analysis.

3.1 Decolonial Theory

The decolonial theory analyzes how coloniality is sustained in postcolonial settings (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007). Decolonial theory recognizes colonialism not in terms of a historical experience but rather as a systemic form of oppression which manifests itself in terms of economic exploitation, political subjugation and epistemic violence (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Key concepts in decolonial theory include:



Fig. 1 Key Concepts of Decolonial Theory

Coloniality of Power: Classification of the global population according to racial hierarchies in relation to labor exploitation, resource extraction and power dynamics (Quijano, 2007).

Coloniality of Knowledge: Positioning of European/Western knowledge as objective, universal and superior to non-Western forms of knowledge which become relegated to the realm of subjectivity (Mignolo, 2011).

Coloniality of Being: Dehumanization of colonized populations and material and symbolic violence done against colonized populations' identities and culture (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).Decolonial theory examines how coloniality persists in seemingly postcolonial contexts (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007). Decolonial analysis identifies colonialism not as a past historical event but as an ongoing system of domination operating through economic exploitation, political control and epistemic violence (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

3.2 Indigenous Research Methodologies

Indigenous research methodologies articulated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Shawn Wilson (2008), and Margaret Kovach (2009) contest the westernized research methodologies that have historically dehumanized, misrepresented and taken advantage of indigenous peoples. The methodologies are characterized by:

Relationality : Where research involves building and nurturing relationships rather than collecting data from the research participants (Wilson, 2008).

Community accountability: Where research is accountable to community’s needs and not just academics

(Smith, 1999).

Indigenous epistemologies: Where research should respect and utilize indigenous ways of knowing rather than western ones (Kovach, 2009).

Decolonizing intentions: Where research seeks to decolonize the community (Smith, 1999).

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study employed systematic review methodology combined with critical discourse analysis to examine literature on decolonizing educational leadership. Systematic review provides rigorous, transparent methods for identifying, selecting and synthesizing existing research (Gough et al., 2017). Critical discourse analysis enables examination of power dynamics and epistemological assumptions embedded in this literature (Fairclough, 2013).

4.2 Literature Search Strategy

Comprehensive searches were conducted across multiple databases including ERIC, Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar and ProQuest Dissertations. Indigenous studies databases and journals were specifically targeted to ensure representation of indigenous scholarship.

4.4 Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded through three phases:

Analysis proceeded through three integrated phases. First, thematic analysis involved systematic coding of sources for recurring patterns, including manifestations of colonialism in educational leadership, indigenous leadership practices and philosophies, decolonization strategies, implementation barriers and contextual outcomes and impacts. This phase drew on over sixty peer-reviewed sources to ensure analytical breadth and rigor. Second, critical discourse analysis was applied to educational leadership texts to examine epistemological positioning, embedded power relations, subject positioning and underlying ideological assumptions, following the framework established by Fairclough (2013) and van Dijk (2008). This phase revealed how apparently neutral leadership language routinely encodes Western cultural assumptions. Third, synthesis brought together the thematic and discursive findings to address the research questions, with particular attention to conceptual patterns across sources, tensions and contradictions, gaps in existing literature and implications for policy and practice. The rationale for selecting case studies from both indigenous-controlled institutions and mainstream institutions undergoing decolonization was to capture the full spectrum of implementation contexts, thereby enhancing the transferability of findings across the diverse educational landscapes of Africa. A key limitation acknowledged throughout is the uneven availability of empirical data from sub-Saharan African contexts; much of the existing scholarship originates from North America and New Zealand, which may limit the direct applicability of some findings to the African context and should be considered when interpreting the results.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Manifestations of Colonialism in Educational Leadership

5.1.1 Epistemological Dominance

Analysis showed that colonialism in educational leadership operates primarily through epistemological dominance (Battiste, 2013; Dei, 2018). Leadership preparation textbooks and programs overwhelmingly teach Western theories without acknowledging their cultural specificity or examining alternatives (Lumby & English, 2009). Academic publishing systems gate keep knowledge production, requiring conformity to Western academic conventions and marginalizing indigenous knowledge transmission methods (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Leadership credentialing requires Western academic degrees, excluding community-validated indigenous leaders (Brayboy et al., 2012).

5.1.2 Structural Hierarchies

Colonial power relations are engrained in organizational structures that concentrate decision-making authority in administrators while disregarding community participation (Blackmore, 2010). Schools and universities usually feature hierarchical governance with boards of trustees and administrative hierarchies that ignore or tokenize indigenous and community voices (Patel, 2016).

5.1.3 Cultural Erasure

Colonial educational leadership maintains cultural erasure through curriculum promoting Western knowledge, English-only or Western-language-dominant policies, standardized assessments measuring Western knowledge and institutional cultures reflecting Western values (Grande, 2004; McCarty & Lee, 2014). Leadership practices that appear culturally neutral embody Western cultural assumptions about knowledge, change and human relations (Dimmock & Walker, 2005).

5.2 Indigenous Leadership Philosophies and Governance Models

5.2.1 Collective and Consensus-Based Decision-Making

Indigenous leadership across diverse cultural contexts emphasizes collective rather than hierarchical decision-making (Letseka, 2013). Effective decisions emerge through extensive consultation, incorporation of diverse perspectives and consensus-building rather than unilateral administrative determination (Brayboy et al., 2012).

5.2.2 Elder Leadership and Intergenerational Governance

Indigenous educational governance includes significant elder participation with genuine decision-making authority rather than merely ceremonial roles (Brayboy et al., 2012). Elders serve as cultural knowledge keepers, curriculum advisors, language teachers and governance participants ensuring cultural continuity and institutional accountability to community values (Battiste, 2002; Simpson, 2014).

5.2.3 Place-Based and Land-Centered Governance

Indigenous leadership philosophies emphasize connections to specific lands and places as fundamental to identity, knowledge, and governance (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015; Bang et al., 2014). Leadership carries responsibilities to land, water, ancestors and future generations connected to specific territories, not just to the current human community members (Simpson, 2017).

5.3 Implementation Barriers and Challenges

5.3.1 Institutional Resistance

Institutional resistance represents the most persistent barrier to decolonizing educational leadership (Patel, 2016; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Resistance manifests through multiple mechanisms, including active opposition from administrators trained in Western paradigms who regard indigenous governance as insufficiently rigorous or professionally legitimate, structural inertia embedded in long-standing bureaucratic procedures and the marginalization of indigenous voices within formal governance bodies. Faculty members conditioned by Western academic norms may resist curriculum changes that center non-Western epistemologies, while accrediting bodies continue to privilege institutional models conforming to Eurocentric standards (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Overcoming this resistance requires sustained institutional commitment, visible leadership from senior administrators and the creation of accountability mechanisms that make decolonization a formal institutional priority rather than a discretionary add-on (Patel, 2016).

5.3.2 Policy and Legislative Constraints

Educational institutions operate within broader policy contexts that often constrain decolonization possibilities (Patel, 2016; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Key constraints include rigid accreditation requirements that favour Western institutional models, funding structures tied to enrolment and performance metrics that do not reflect indigenous educational values, teacher certification frameworks that exclude community-validated indigenous educators and national curriculum mandates that leave little room for locally grounded knowledge systems. In the African context, many post-independence education policies adopted colonial-era administrative structures wholesale, creating layers of legislative inertia that reformers must navigate carefully. Addressing these constraints requires coordinated advocacy at both institutional and governmental levels to revise policies so that they actively enable rather than merely tolerate indigenous governance models (Patel, 2016; African Union Commission, 2016).

5.3.3 Capacity and Resource Limitations

Many institutions committed to decolonization lack capacity and resources for effective implementation (Shotton et al., 2013; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Significant challenges include the acute shortage of indigenous faculty and administrators who can model and sustain decolonized leadership practice, insufficient and often project-based funding that cannot support the sustained institutional change that decolonization requires and knowledge gaps among non-indigenous staff who lack adequate training in indigenous epistemologies or culturally responsive governance. These capacity deficits are compounded in many African universities where overall resource constraints are severe, making it difficult to prioritize decolonization programming without external support. Addressing these limitations demands dedicated budget allocations, targeted recruitment strategies for indigenous scholars, sustained professional development programs and research partnerships that build local knowledge rather than perpetuating dependence on external expertise (Shotton et al., 2013).

5.4 Outcomes and Impacts of Decolonization

5.4.1 Educational Outcomes for Indigenous Students

Research consistently documents positive educational outcomes when leadership is decolonized and indigenous knowledge and governance are integrated (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009). Studies across

multiple contexts reveal improved student engagement and retention, with indigenous students demonstrating evidently higher attendance and course completion rates in culturally grounded institutions compared to conventional schools (Bishop et al., 2003). Academic achievement similarly improves when students are taught within frameworks that affirm rather than negate their cultural identities, as documented by Brayboy and Maughan (2009) in their longitudinal analysis of indigenous higher education programs. Beyond academic metrics, decolonized leadership fosters stronger cultural identity and psychological wellbeing among learners, an outcome of particular significance in post-colonial African contexts where colonial schooling historically inflicted deep cultural harm (McCarty & Lee, 2014; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). These findings collectively suggest that decolonization is not merely a symbolic or political project but a concrete strategy for improving measurable educational outcomes, particularly for marginalized communities. The implications for African educational policy are significant: institutions that invest in culturally responsive leadership and governance can expect improvements not only in equity indicators but also in the overall quality and relevance of educational provision.

5.4.2 Cultural Preservation and Revitalization

Decolonized educational leadership contributes significantly to cultural preservation and revitalization (McCarty & Lee, 2014; Simpson, 2014). Where institutions have adopted indigenous-led governance and integrated traditional knowledge into curricula, three interconnected outcomes are consistently documented. Language revitalization is among the most tangible: schools operating under indigenous governance models actively promote mother-tongue instruction and intergenerational language transmission, reversing patterns of linguistic erosion driven by colonial schooling (McCarty & Lee, 2014; May & Hill, 2005). Traditional knowledge transmission is equally central, with elder participation in curriculum governance ensuring that ecological knowledge, oral histories, ceremonial practices and community values are passed on systematically rather than being allowed to atrophy (Cajete, 1994; Battiste, 2002). Finally, decolonized institutions serve as sites of community healing, providing spaces where the historical trauma associated with colonial education can be acknowledged, processed and addressed through culturally grounded practice (Brave Heart, 2003; Gone, 2013). In the African context, these outcomes carry particular urgency: UNESCO (2022) estimates that over 2,000 African languages face varying degrees of endangerment, many as a direct consequence of colonial language policies in education. Decolonized educational leadership therefore has a critical role to play in reversing this trajectory.

5.4.3 Enhanced Community Engagement

Decolonized governance structures increase community involvement in educational institutions (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Toulouse, 2016). When communities have genuine decision-making authority, trust increases, participation expands, and institutions become more accountable and responsive to community needs (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009).

5.5.4 Institutional Transformation

Decolonization efforts generate broader institutional transformations that extend well beyond the individual outcomes described above (Antoine et al., 2018; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). At the epistemological level, institutions that embrace indigenous governance develop epistemic pluralism, formally recognizing multiple knowledge traditions as equally legitimate and embedding this recognition in research agendas, hiring criteria and curriculum design (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). This shift disrupts the implied hierarchy that positions Western academic knowledge as the universal standard against which all other ways of knowing are judged. At the governance level, decolonization produces more genuinely

democratic structures by ensuring that communities historically excluded from institutional decision-making gain formal representation and real authority, thereby strengthening both legitimacy and accountability (Antoine et al., 2018). These governance changes in turn cultivate a clearer social justice orientation across the institution, with resource allocation, research priorities and partnership strategies increasingly aligned with the needs and aspirations of marginalized communities rather than with external market or ranking pressures (Khalifa et al., 2016; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016). Taken together, these transformations suggest that decolonization is generative rather than merely corrective: it does not simply remove colonial elements but actively creates more equitable, responsive and contextually grounded institutions capable of serving their communities more effectively.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 From Accommodation to Transformation

A central finding is the critical distinction between accommodating indigenous knowledge within unchanged Western structures versus fundamentally transforming structures themselves (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Patel, 2016). Many well-intentioned efforts remain at the accommodation level without challenging underlying power structures (Ahmed, 2012; Grande, 2004). True decolonization requires structural transformation (Dei, 2018; Smith, 2012).

6.2 Power, Authority and Decision-Making

Decolonizing educational leadership involves redistributing power and decision-making authority (Blackmore, 2010; Patel, 2016). Successful decolonization initiatives establish formal governance mechanisms providing indigenous communities genuine authority (Brayboy et al., 2012; Toulouse, 2016).

6.3 Epistemological Justice and Knowledge Pluralism

Decolonization centrally encompasses epistemological justice (Battiste, 2013; Fricker, 2007). Achieving epistemological justice requires institutional recognition that indigenous knowledge systems offer sophisticated, empirically grounded and valid understandings of the world developed over millennia (Cajete, 1994; Wilson, 2008).

6.4 Relationality and Community Accountability

Indigenous leadership philosophies emphasize relationality (Wilson, 2008; Cajete, 1994). Decolonized leadership structures prioritize horizontal accountability to communities served rather than vertical accountability to governmental or accrediting authorities (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Toulouse, 2016).

6.5 Implementation Pathways and Strategies

The analysis reveals several critical implementation strategies: community-driven processes (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018), gradual authority transfer (Antoine et al., 2018), institutional commitment (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Patel, 2016), professional development (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) and coalition building (Patel, 2016

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 For Educational Institutions

· Establish Indigenous-Led Governance Councils with Decision-Making Authority

- Restructure Leadership Credentialing to Recognize Indigenous Knowledge and Community Validation
- Allocate Dedicated, Sustainable Funding for Decolonization
- Mandate Decolonization Training for All Educational Leaders
- Restructure Curriculum to Center Indigenous Knowledge

7.2 For Policymakers

- Revise Accreditation Standards to Recognize Diverse Leadership and Governance
- Ensure Equitable Funding for Indigenous-Controlled Institutions
- Establish Indigenous Education Sovereignty Legislation

7.3 For Researchers

- Conduct Longitudinal Research on Decolonization Effectiveness
- Center Indigenous Scholars and Knowledge Systems in Educational Leadership Research
- Examine Intersections of Decolonization with Other Equity Efforts

8. CONCLUSION

This methodical examination of decolonizing educational leadership reveals both the necessity and significant challenges of transforming governance structures shaped by Western-centric colonial frameworks in Africa and beyond. The persistence of colonial logics in present educational leadership signifies ongoing structural violence requiring urgent redress. Indigenous leadership philosophies offer sophisticated alternatives grounded in relationality, collective decision-making, intergenerational wisdom and place-based knowledge. The evidence reviewed in this study consistently demonstrates that authentic decolonization yields tangible benefits: improved student engagement and retention, stronger cultural identity and wellbeing, revitalized indigenous languages and more accountable, community-responsive governance structures. These outcomes make a compelling case that decolonization is not an optional enhancement but a foundational requirement for educational equity in African and other post-colonial contexts. To translate these insights into action, the study identifies several priorities for key stakeholders. Educational institutions should establish indigenous-led governance councils with genuine decision-making authority, restructure credentialing systems to recognize community-validated indigenous leadership and allocate sustained, dedicated funding for decolonization programs rather than relying on short-term project grants. Leaders and educators must commit to ongoing decolonization training that moves beyond tokenistic cultural awareness to substantive transformation of pedagogical and governance practice. Policymakers at national and continental levels are urged to revise accreditation standards so that diverse governance models receive formal recognition and to enact indigenous education sovereignty legislation that protects communities' rights to shape the institutions that serve them. Researchers should prioritize longitudinal, community-partnered studies that generate Africa-specific evidence on decolonization effectiveness, centering indigenous scholars and ensuring that knowledge production itself reflects the epistemic pluralism this study advocates. Collectively, these steps can move African educational leadership from accommodation to genuine transformation, building institutions capable of honoring the full diversity of human knowledge and advancing equity for all learners.

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