



Decolonising data in education

Radhika Gorur, Minoli Wijetunga

▶ THE PROJECT

There is, today, a growing understanding of the colonising effects of datafied and digitised governance practices, and of the ways in which new data practices are exacerbating old inequities and creating new ones. There is enormous interest in fields such as climate change and health to decolonise data and promote data sovereignty (Hummel et al, 2021), epistemic justice (Bhambra, 2021), reparative justice (Sriprakash, 2022), data rights and other means to ‘decolonise data’. Globally, there is immense interest in more respectful, less extractive

and more justice-oriented forms of datafication which do not disempower those whose data is being taken.

As new theories and ideas emerge related to data colonialism in multiple fields, this project sought to draw together its theoretical threads and assemble a clearer understanding of data colonialism, with a focus on how it might operate in the field of education, and provide examples of policies and programs that aim to decolonise education data.



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▶ KEY FINDINGS

Efforts to ‘decolonise data’ are an important response to the exploitation and injustice of data colonialism, but effective resistance requires deeper theorisation of coloniality, capitalism and data in contemporary contexts. Data colonialism operates through intertwined systems of wealth concentration, knowledge appropriation, legal and technological infrastructures, and epistemic and material violence. Understanding it demands interdisciplinary approaches that can trace its complex mechanisms of domination and control.

Contemporary data colonialism also involves diverse and hybrid actors—governments, corporations, and global development organisations—whose intersecting agendas complicate analysis. For example, Big Tech’s integration into international projects advocating data rights illustrates how power and extraction are now embedded within seemingly progressive initiatives. Focusing only on traditional notions of data sovereignty or epistemic dominance risks overlooking state-led data practices that produce marginalisation and inequity within nations. Moreover, large digital infrastructures often generate

collateral bias and harm, making sources of domination difficult to locate.

While frameworks exist for First Nations data governance, broader approaches are needed that treat data rights as an inalienable entitlement for all citizens and communities. In education, students are particularly vulnerable: their data are routinely captured through digital platforms without meaningful consent or awareness. These systems shape access, assessment and participation, often reinforcing inequities.

Beyond questions of ownership and consent, further theorisation is needed to understand how data creates new forms of inequality and coloniality through emerging relations of connectivity (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Milan and Treré (2019) urge that critical data studies itself must confront its universalising tendencies and recognise the plural experiences of the Global South. Following their lead, resistance to data colonialism must centre community agency, foster alternative imaginaries of data, and cultivate new, locally grounded theories and practices of data justice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To advance meaningful resistance to data colonialism, several interrelated directions are needed.

First, research must deepen theoretical understandings of how coloniality, capitalism, and data intersect today, tracing continuities between historical forms of domination and contemporary digital infrastructures. This requires interdisciplinary approaches that link political economy, technology, and postcolonial thought.

Second, scholars must analyse the complex assemblages of actors—governments, corporations, consultants, and international organisations—whose overlapping agendas shape data-driven governance. Understanding these hybrid formations is key to locating responsibility and accountability.

Third, decolonial analyses must extend beyond questions of sovereignty to address the inequities produced by state-led and infrastructural data projects within nations, including in education systems where data collection often proceeds without awareness or consent.

Fourth, data rights should be recognised as foundational, not contingent on advocacy, and built into institutional frameworks as default protections for individuals and communities.

Finally, research and practice should centre agency, locality, and plural imaginaries of data, recognising that alternative ways of thinking and governing data are emerging from diverse contexts. Grounding theory in such community-led practices will be essential for developing more equitable and reflexive data futures that resist extractive and universalising logics.



“A single framework of metrics for education performance data from every part of the world, arranged within a global data dashboard, may appear equitable. However, the impulses that drive such thinking often disregard the diversity of cultural and spiritual realities, the different worldviews and the varied epistemological and ontological frameworks of the populations whose data are gathered and displayed on these dashboards.”

NEXT STEPS

This work was translated into a chapter for the book [Transforming Development in Education](#) edited by Moira Faul and published open source.

The authors prepared a video to introduce their chapter as part of the [book launch](#).

Professor Gorur presented a keynote on Data Colonialism in Education in the Policy Futures International Webinar Series, Aarhus University, 15 May 2024.

REFERENCES

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