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**Introduction to the Special Issue: Transforming School  
Systems**

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**Citation:** Shah, V., & Farrell, C. C. (2025). Introduction to the special issue: Transforming school systems. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 33(5). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.33.9106> This article is part of the special issue **Transforming School Systems: Questions of Power, Resistance, Equity, and Community** guest edited by Caitlin Farrell and Vidya Shah.

**Abstract:** As scholars studying school districts, we became increasingly concerned with how research from the Global North dominates global understandings of school governance, organization, and reform—what we term coloniality in global education reform. This special issue seeks to broaden these perspectives by examining how schools might be governed and organized with a focus on power, history, local and regional contexts, multiple ways of knowing, and sociopolitical dynamics. Through six articles, this issue interrogates how power operates and shifts across school organizing, governance, and community engagement. Featured studies span topics such as anti-racist leadership practices, the sociopolitical contexts of reform implementation, the reproduction of inequalities through “shadow education,” and the racialized dynamics of state takeovers. Insights from the Global South, particularly from Mexico and Brazil, challenge dominant narratives rooted in the Global North, highlighting the need to decenter Eurocentric perspectives. Extending this analysis, we reflect on how coloniality shaped the editorial process itself, revealing tensions around language, power, and representation in academic publishing. By questioning both

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global education reform practices and traditional approaches to academic scholarship, this special issue invites readers to critically examine with us the dominant paradigms and imagine more just, inclusive, and contextually-grounded possibilities for school governance and organization.

**Keywords:** global education reform; school district; coloniality; governance; power

### **Introducción al número especial: Transformando los sistemas escolares**

**Resumen:** Como académicos que estudiamos los distritos escolares, nos preocupamos cada vez más por cómo la investigación del Norte Global domina las comprensiones globales de la gobernanza, la organización y la reforma escolar, lo que llamamos colonialidad en la reforma educativa global. Este número especial busca ampliar estas perspectivas al examinar cómo las escuelas pueden ser gobernadas y organizadas con un enfoque en el poder, la historia, los contextos locales y regionales, las múltiples formas de conocimiento y la dinámica sociopolítica. A través de seis artículos, este número interroga cómo opera y cambia el poder en la organización, la gobernanza y la participación comunitaria de las escuelas. Los estudios destacados abarcan temas como las prácticas de liderazgo antirracista, los contextos sociopolíticos de la implementación de la reforma, la reproducción de las desigualdades a través de la "educación en la sombra" y la dinámica racializada de las tomas de poder por parte del Estado. Las perspectivas del Sur Global, en particular de México y Brasil, desafían las narrativas dominantes arraigadas en el Norte Global, destacando la necesidad de descentrar las perspectivas eurocéntricas. Ampliando este análisis, reflexionamos sobre cómo la colonialidad dio forma al proceso editorial en sí, revelando tensiones en torno al lenguaje, el poder y la representación en la publicación académica. Al cuestionar tanto las prácticas de reforma educativa global como los enfoques tradicionales de la investigación académica, este número especial invita a los lectores a examinar críticamente con nosotros los paradigmas dominantes e imaginar posibilidades más justas, inclusivas y contextualizadas para la gobernanza y la organización escolar.

**Palabras clave:** reforma educativa global; distrito escolar; colonialidad; gobernanza; poder

### **Introdução à dossiê: Transformando os sistemas escolares**

**Resumo:** Como acadêmicos que estudam distritos escolares, nos preocupamos cada vez mais com a forma como a pesquisa do Norte Global domina as compreensões globais de governança, organização e reforma escolar — o que chamamos de colonialidade na reforma educacional global. Esta edição especial busca ampliar essas perspectivas examinando como as escolas podem ser governadas e organizadas com foco no poder, na história, nos contextos locais e regionais, nas múltiplas formas de conhecimento e na dinâmica sociopolítica. Por meio de seis artigos, esta edição questiona como o poder opera e muda na organização escolar, governança e engajamento comunitário. Os estudos em destaque abrangem tópicos como práticas de liderança antirracistas, os contextos sociopolíticos da implementação da reforma, a reprodução de desigualdades por meio da "educação paralela" e a dinâmica racializada das aquisições estatais. Insights do Sul Global, particularmente do México e do Brasil, desafiam as narrativas dominantes enraizadas no Norte Global, destacando a necessidade de descentralizar as perspectivas eurocêntricas. Estendendo esta análise, refletimos sobre como a colonialidade moldou o próprio processo editorial, revelando tensões em torno da linguagem, poder e representação na publicação acadêmica. Ao questionar tanto as práticas de reforma educacional global quanto as abordagens tradicionais ao conhecimento acadêmico, esta edição especial convida os leitores a examinar criticamente conosco os paradigmas dominantes e imaginar possibilidades mais justas, inclusivas e contextualizadas para a governança e organização escolar.

**Palavras-chave:** reforma educacional global; distrito escolar; colonialidade; governança; poder

## **Introduction to the Special Issue: Transforming School Systems**

Most studies on systems-level education reform emphasize ideas of “deep learning,” capacity-building, local implementation of top-down initiatives, using data for decisions, and scaling up “what works” (Erickson, 2014). However, these studies often fail to adequately engage the voices from families, communities, and Indigenous knowledge(s); the resistance and agency of educators and communities; where and how power can be (re)distributed and (re)negotiated; and, how historically marginalized groups experience or are impacted by educational policies. The research on how K-12 school systems are governed and organized around the world rests on unexamined claims of educational change - where technical, linear, and standardized solutions supersede the organic, contextual, and complex nature of learning and change.

This special issue focuses on how colonial mindsets and lenses have, and continue to, undergird these traditional views. Coloniality, as described by Mignolo and Walsh (2018), refers to the dominance of Western ways, Eurocentrism, and global capitalism that control how knowledge is created and shared, and whose knowledge is privileged (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Coloniality, therefore, is a pattern of power that operates at multiple levels: socio-political, cultural, ontological, epistemological, and symbolic (Quijano, 2007).

As scholars concerned with school governance and organization, we (the editors) began questioning how these dominant approaches shape not only global educational policies, but also research on school systems and education reform. What assumptions are we making? Which perspectives or methodologies have been overused and which have been underexplored or absent entirely? How does local context, history, and culture shape the kinds of values, operations, and organization of educational systems? What questions are we not asking, and whose voices are we not hearing?

These questions prompted an invitation to the education research field for inquiry in these areas:

- How do groups of schools organize themselves, and why?
- What criteria are used to include or exclude schools in school systems, and for what purposes or rationale?
- How are geographic or sociopolitical boundaries determined in systems of schools?
- How are different models of local and community engagement or decision-making shape school governance?
- How do colonial histories continue to shape how educational reforms are transferred from one region to another, and whose knowledge is prioritized in these processes?
- What can we learn from the governance and organization of schools in the Global South to challenge dominant models from the Global North?
- How are schools organized to address the needs of students, families, and communities most underserved by schooling?
- How have historical and contemporary imprints of colonialism and coloniality been maintained in the “transfer” and “adoption” of reform literature from the Global North in the Global South? In other words, who is seen to have the capacity to generate knowledge, and who is expected to receive this knowledge and implement policies locally?

In what follows, we offer high level insights from this collection in response to these questions, and we conclude with a critical examination of our roles and experiences as editors within broader processes of academic publishing.

## **Global Insights on School District Governance and Organization**

The six articles in this special issue span a range of topics on school governance and organization, all with an eye to issues of power, racism, coloniality, and community in educational reforms for justice. While attempts were made to invite manuscripts outside of the United States in particular, four of the six articles here are from American-based scholars and written in English. One article is written in Spanish and highlights the context of Guanajuato, Mexico, and one article is written in Portuguese and highlights shadow education in multiple contexts globally. We appreciate the insights these authors share in their work and the questions they raise.

### **Examining How Formal and “Shadow” Educational Reforms Influence Teachers, Schools, and Social Inequality**

Fierro & Hempel and Moreira & Neto-Mendes explore educational reforms as large-scale programs, with one article focused on the formal education system and the other on education parallel to the traditional system. Fierro & Hempel present an ethnographic study examining teachers’ perceptions and practices of the “Coexistence Model to Address, Prevent and Eradicate School Violence in the Mexican state of Guanajuato.” They demonstrate how sociopolitical contexts in Mexico, contradictory demands and difficult conditions in schooling, delays in post-pandemic learning, as well as punitive logics of coexistence policies, cause tensions and uncertainty among teachers. Teachers employ strategies of involvement and distancing, each with different implications for the development of discourse and practice of coexistence in schools. Moreira & Neto-Mendes explore a phenomenon known as “shadow education,” which includes “tutoring” or “parallel education” and highlights how social class, cultural capital, a competitive ethos, and family economic resources impact educational outcomes, particularly in secondary education. Considering contributions by Bourdieu and Passeron in the context of the theory of cultural and social reproduction, this integrative literature review sheds light on how shadow education reproduces social inequalities.

### **Exploring Justice-Oriented Educational Reforms and Leadership Practices**

Three of the papers situated in the United States conceive of reforms for justice as influencing leaders to make better choices for transformative change. Kaiser et al.’s study examines acts and movements of resistance from communities, educators, and researchers linked to educational reform and the power dynamics that shape these relationships. This participatory action research study of an anti-racist leadership learning series targeting white principals in schools in the greater Seattle area explores the complexities of race, power, and equity in educational reform, pushing the boundaries of traditional partnerships and leadership norms and offering insights into transformative practices for a just educational future. Salisbury and Cummings share a three-year critical qualitative study of an urban district attempting to disrupt inequitable relations between district leadership and stakeholders of color. Drawing on the concepts of whiteness as property and racial fortuity, this manuscript unearths how white leaders and organizational practices maintain leadership as a propertied interest of whiteness and how youth of color engage in productive resistance to enact racially-just changes in district practices. Finally, Peters et al. investigate how three large urban school districts in the United States design and implement equity-centered leadership pathways post-COVID-19, exploring how sociopolitical and cultural contexts influence leadership pathway development and the experiences of principals of color. The authors employ organizational culture as a framework to analyze how leadership pathways function as levers for educational improvement.

## **Critical Analysis of Justice Reforms in School District Governance**

Finally, Dawer considers reforms for justice at the school district level, employing critical policy analysis (CPA) to analyze the policy discourses Texas Education Agency (TEA) officials invoked in the early stages of the 2023 state takeover of Houston Independent School District (HISD). The findings suggest that the racialized narratives underpinning the takeover in Houston produced a disciplinary dynamic that reframed the democratic engagement of marginalized communities as a threat to the smooth implementation of state education policies, and legitimized increased state management and control over the takeover process. This article sheds light on the lines of authority and power between different spheres of control in education from the community, district, and state levels.

## **Politics of Purpose, Process, and Content in Academic Publishing**

In this special issue, we aimed to challenge colonial influences in educational systems as well as in how we in the educational research field conduct and share research. We sat with questions about the nature of knowledge, knowing, and answerability; how power informed every aspect and outcome of the editorial process; the possibilities and limitations of the role of editors; and the very place and purpose of academic journals in the academy and beyond. For all these questions, there were no clear answers or measures of “success.” Below, we share our reflections as editors of the special issue about the importance of engaging deeply with the politics of purpose, process, and content, recognizing the inherently political nature of academic work.

### **Politics of Purpose**

In 2021-2022, we (the editors) served as the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Co-Chairs of the Special Interest Group, Districts in Research and Reform. In this role, we had the chance to highlight research on school districts, support graduate students, and question whose perspectives are prioritized in academic discussions, funding, and awards. This questioning led us to challenge assumptions about power, learn from diverse cultures and contexts, and push against harmful practices in global education reform and within educational research as related to school districts.

This period also reflected a historical moment, the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within our own Canadian and American contexts, school districts – in some cases, overnight – engaged in significant “educational reform” as they moved to online instruction or introduced hybrid instruction, and shifted the roles of teachers, school staff, and parents in dramatic ways (Grossman et al., 2021). In this way, the pandemic disrupted some of the taken-for-granted assumptions we might hold around school governance and organization.

Our intent was to move away from the checklist approach to education reform research that does not challenge standardization, privatization, and marginalization of communities. Instead, we turn our attention to how research itself might challenge existing power structures, learn from and across socio-political geographies, and center local knowledge and community wisdom in the transformative process (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). With this disruption, we wondered how else we could (re)imagine the mainstream approach to school governance by considering community-based, collective, and Indigenous viewpoints.

### **Politics of Process**

Our commitments to challenging traditional power structures in academia highlighted that these systems are deeply embedded in our practices, and our own roles in maintaining and reproducing them. For example, in trying to bridge the gap between the academy, communities, and

places of practice, we invited manuscripts from authors that span these boundaries, who are committed to processes of co-authorship and knowledge sharing within and across these spaces. However, this proved to be harder than expected because of the ways in which higher education often reinforces familiar boundaries that separate academic institutions from other communities.

We also tried to invite manuscripts from authors who speak multiple languages, a process which created both possibilities and challenges. On the one hand, this was our attempt to challenge English supremacy and the limited thinking and writing that comes from an English-only publication, intentionally centering the knowledge(s) of different contexts and lands. In the Portuguese and Spanish manuscripts included here, the understandings of school governance and organization offer such important insights, such as involving communities and elders, and in many ways challenging our narrow North American vision. This posed challenges for us as editors because of our own limitations formed through colonialism. On the one hand, we welcomed different understandings and approaches to school organization and governance. On the other hand, we had to evaluate submissions based on “fit”, having a difficult time determining whether our conceptions of “fit” were too narrowly defined. We also found it difficult to make some of the initial editorial decisions as both of us are only fluent enough in the English language for this role.

Finally, we encountered process challenges regarding time, noting how power operates in the ongoing requests we make of reviewers (especially for those who reviewed papers across languages), *and* in thinking about the importance of time for pre-tenured scholars who rely on these types of publications for tenure. We held these tensions in the context of higher education, where approaches to time create a sense of urgency – including with tenure clocks.

### **Politics of Content**

We aimed to foster dialogue between papers and teams from the Global North and Global South, bridging diverse contexts and lands, and theoretical perspectives, but with less success than we had hoped. A tension we held occurred with inviting authors to name specific local and historical contexts while ensuring applicability and relevance to a global audience. Along the way, we encountered different understandings and conceptions of terms that we (perhaps naively) had assumed were shared, revealing how our own mental models are re/formed by coloniality. For example, our initial call for this special issue may have overemphasized a technical, structural, and administrative framing for how schools are or should be organized and governed— leaving less room for the influences of communities (Dawer), the for-profit sector (Moreira & Neto-Mendes), and the broader socio-political context (Fierro & Hempel).

We would continually invite scholars from the United States to consider what they might learn from school governance and organization in the Global South, a line of questioning that proved difficult for us all. We had to contend with the pervasive Eurocentric perspective of this special issue given the fact that submissions received from nations outside of North America were still from scholars in European nations. What would this issue have looked like if scholars from Ghana, India, Chile, or Cambodia shared their thinking?

Moreover, contextual factors played a key role in noting how power imbalances are recognized, enacted, experienced, and resisted. For example, several articles in this issue foreground issues of race and racism. However, these conversations may fall short in communities and nations for which racism intersects with other systems of power, such as Christian supremacy, language dominance, caste supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism, and more. We also questioned how the format of, or overreliance on, academic journals as avenues for un/learning will always limit the possibilities of scholarship, negating or minimizing embodied, oral, aesthetic, spiritual, and other ways of knowing and being.

## Final Thoughts

Underlying the work of education reform is the assumption that improving education systems is the main response to educational injustices. In challenging coloniality, we are encouraged to question the importance we place on education reform for transformative possibilities. What are the limits of the “school system”? Is our overreliance on reforming school systems part of the problem? How might decentering a focus on education reform research and practice invite greater possibilities for educational justice and reimagining possible futures?

Were we too ambitious with this special issue? Probably. Would we have scaled back if we turned back the clock? Likely not. However, we would have been more realistic about how tensions in the politics of purpose, process, and content would inform our approach and learning as editors. As we reflect on what we have and have not been able to do with this issue, we recognize this issue is simply part of a larger conversation that sheds the light on important questions about power in research on global education and reform. We have not engaged in the type of dialogues we had hoped for between the Global North and the Global South and between research, practitioners, and community partners. Nonetheless, the aspiration to create more space for these and other dialogues, is a worthy endeavour. We invite you to join us.

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