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Embracing Epistemological Pluralism Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

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James Moffett, a respected scholar of the English Language Arts, once wrote prophetically that

...the many interlocking problems of this nation and this world are escalating so rapidly that only swift changes in thought and action can save either. The generation about to enter schools may be the last who can still reverse the negative megatrends converging today. In order for these children to learn the needed **new ways of thinking** the present generation in charge of society must begin to set up for them **a kind of education it never had and arrange to educate itself further at the same time.**¹

Now, more than twenty-five years after these words were written, that generation is well into adult life, and we have not yet reversed these “negative megatrends,” nor have we developed widely shared “new ways of thinking” that might enable a livable future. As Stephen Sterling says in his [opening essay](#), “Our educational systems are implicated in the multiple crises before us, and without meaningful rethinking, they will remain maladaptive agents of business as usual, leading us into a dystopian future nobody wants.” And it is not just rethinking but remaking that we need to embark upon—and we need to do that yesterday.

We are plummeting into this dystopian future, its latest iteration a global pandemic for which the nations of the world were clearly unprepared. In terms of education, the havoc thus created—the closing of schools, sending children into their homes for much of a year, moving instruction online—has had an effect of opening a sort of “portal,” a gateway into an uncertain future in which many of the features of schooling taken for granted no longer make sense. Educators and parents are asking, “What have we learned?” “What do we hold onto as we move forward?” and

“What do we need to discard?” I doubt this dialogue could have opened as it has without a crisis to spark it, given the tendency of people to maintain the status quo even when it is no longer functional. My recent research has been around the question of what needs to happen in the field of pre/K-12 education to support the “great transition” this forum is devoted to exploring.

To begin to understand why deep systems change toward a more just and sustainable form of education has been so difficult, in spite of the Earth Charter, the Sustainable Development Goals, innumerable progressive educational reform movements, and the widespread enthusiasm of many teachers and families for a new “paradigm” of education, we must understand the roots of the modern system. The old German Republic of Prussia, a quasi-military state, gave the West compulsory schooling, educational technologies of surveillance and control, the idea of a prescribed national curriculum, regular testing, and state certification for professional teachers. Complementing the influence of Prussian methods were the laboratories of Wilhelm Wundt in nineteenth-century Saxony, where the seeds of psychological behavior modification and social control were germinated, tested, and refined. Strong traces of these ideas remain in the organization of knowledge into separate subjects, standardized testing, systems of discipline, age segregation, positive and negative reinforcement, grades, and rewards—everything from praise to pizza to degrees. This form of education spread across the globe in tandem with capitalism and colonization, and it persists today, accompanied by the loss of languages, the loss of cultural identity, the loss of traditional technologies evolved in response to local conditions, and the loss of bioregional sensibilities. Some indigenous scholars understand this form of education as a threat to their sovereignty: “...wherever education advances, homogenization establishes itself. With every advancement of education or the educated, a ‘global monoculture spreads like an oil slick over the entire planet.’”²

This monoculture enacts a form of epistemicide, which has the effect of deposing pedagogies that are embedded in the specificities of place, and ways of knowing that have been discarded as the knowledge/technology formations of global capital have subsumed the cultures and habitats that might point us toward more sustainable lifeways.³ If we take seriously the need for a deep shift in the very ontological, epistemological, and ethical foundations of how we educate young people, then we must embrace *epistemological pluralism*, integrating modern forms of

investigation and understanding with more ancient wisdom. This need not be a “romanticizing” of indigenous cultures, nor an adoption/appropriation of premodern cultural practices. All cultures, modern and premodern, industrial and pre-industrial, colonial and colonized, have their own unique inequalities and abuses, and our task is to recognize what is of value and what is not in multiple forms of cultural knowledge, and to cultivate localized epistemologies of place.

A “systems transformation” will necessarily include reconceptualizing not just curriculum content, but also instructional approaches, school policies such as discipline, school culture, family/community relations, physical and visual culture, and teacher preparation.⁴ Educational systems change cannot happen in a vacuum. The “new ways of thinking” necessary for an educational paradigm shift will necessarily have to happen in a wider context of social, economic, and ecological transformation.

I live in Vermont, a tiny mountainous state in the US with more than its share of left-leaning activist organizations as well as a vibrant progressive education network. Many educators and activists are beginning to coalesce around an expanded idea of community schools, not merely the conventional notion of providing wraparound social services, but a deep engagement in local communities, where can be found robust coalitions of regenerative agriculturalists, sustainable food systems projects, green builders, artists and artisans, and worker and consumer cooperatives. Legislation passed in 2013 requires that each student have a personalized, self-directed learning plan that allows them to select mentors from the community to study with; that permits “flexible pathways” to high school graduation which can include apprenticeships, internships, work study, or service learning; and that includes a proficiency-based system of assessment that gives young people the time and space they need to master subjects and gain skill. Carnegie units that merely measure seat time have been dispensed with as have letter grades, and in many places, required course work. In truth, many schools are still struggling to resolve the contradictions between these innovative approaches and old mental models of schooling. However, in my research, I have interviewed young people who have graduated from high school without spending time in traditional classrooms, but rather have crafted their own community-based, experiential learning of the knowledge and skills needed for a just transition.

Systems change is not for the faint-hearted. Educational systems in modern societies operate in multiple dimensions: bureaucracies, buildings, psychological frames, professional preparation and associations, and boards, and are sustained by a powerful ideological apparatus that includes media, textbooks, curriculum, union contracts, and policy at multiple levels. The historical moment, however, offers clear, if difficult choices: we can attempt to return to “normal,” despite the fact that “normal” was not working for people or planet, or we can embrace the complexity and uncertainty of a bolder, more comprehensive approach to **transformative systems change**. The climate crises, environmental collapse, species extinction, growing inequality, racism, food and shelter insecurity, and high levels of anxiety, depression, addiction, and despair in both young and old are calling forth our best efforts to transform not just the educational system, but the social, economic, and political infrastructure it is embedded in. This will require an extraordinary educational and social imagination, to design and implement a *kind of education we never had and arrange to educate ourselves further at the same time*.

Endnotes

1. James Moffett, *The Universal Schoolhouse: Spiritual Awakening through Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), xii.
2. Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning within Grassroots Cultures* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing., 1998), 7.
3. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemology of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2014).
4. Kathleen Kesson, “Decolonizing Education: Implications for Systems Transformation in Vermont,” 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/590cbe53ebbd1afaa38e2081/t/5e5955cf1ad11748b220b40c/1582912979187/Decolonizing+Education+%2820%29.pdf>.

About the Author



Kathleen Kesson is Professor Emerita of Teaching, Learning and Leadership in the School of Education at Long Island University Brooklyn. She is the former Director of Teacher Education at Goddard College and was the founding Director of the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education at the University of Vermont. She has published numerous books and articles on democracy and education, curriculum, critical theory, and spirituality and education. She is currently a Global Affiliate with the GUND Institute for Environment at the University of Vermont, and deeply engaged with statewide efforts to promote school/community partnerships around a “just transition” in Vermont. She holds a doctorate in education from Oklahoma State University.

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