Transforming transformative reflective learning. Fostering autonomous thinking in multicultural education settings with a feminist, intersectional, decolonial approach

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Abstract

This article explores transformative and reflective learning as a powerful framework for cultivating autonomous thinking in multicultural education, guided by feminist, intersectional, and decolonial approaches. By encouraging learners to critically examine their beliefs and cultural assumptions, transformative learning fosters inclusive education that supports social responsibility and empathy. Theoretical foundations from Mezirow, Freire, and feminist theorists like bell hooks and Ellsworth are applied to demonstrate how educational systems can actively challenge hegemonic knowledge structures and support marginalized voices. This work emphasizes the critical role of dialogue, intercultural competence, and ethical reflection in equipping individuals to engage meaningfully with diversity.
Keywords: transformative and reflective learning theory, critical pedagogy, intersectional feminism in education, decolonial education practices, communicative dialogical approach.

First submission: 06/03/2025 accepted:10/06/2025

Introduction

In contemporary society, particularly within increasingly complex multicultural scenarios, the need for individuals to understand the meaning of their experiences takes on heightened significance. While some may be content to rely on explanations from authority figures, modern educational systems must encourage independent thinking, critical reflection, and the ability to form one's own interpretations.

Educational Reflective Practices (ISSNe 2279-9605), 2/2025
Doi: 10.3280/erpoa2-2025oa20505

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This process, rooted in Transformative Learning Theory, as defined by Mezirow (1991, 2003) and Cranton (1994), is essential in fostering autonomous, socially responsible individuals capable of navigating diverse and globalized societies. Transformative learning is the process by which individuals undergo a fundamental shift in their frames of reference. These frames encompass values, concepts, emotions, and responses developed through life experiences and cultural conditioning. As Jürgen Habermas (1981) notes, learning has various dimensions – ranging from problem-solving and adhering to societal norms to the deeper process of communicative learning, which involves reaching mutual understanding through dialogue. The transformative process requires individuals to reflect critically on their assumptions, values, and beliefs and to engage in discourse that fosters a shared understanding of diverse perspectives. In multicultural societies, this critical reflection and dialogue are paramount. Social norms, cultural habits, and points of view can vary dramatically between individuals and groups, leading to misunderstandings and tension. For education to be transformative in such a context, it must promote not just cognitive growth but also intercultural competence, empathy, and the ability to navigate cultural differences. This aligns with Freire's (1970) notion of "conscientização", where learners, particularly those from marginalized groups, become aware of their socio-cultural realities and engage critically with them to foster societal change. In this context, the ideas of Italian pedagogist Lamberto Borghi provide further insight into the transformative potential of education in multicultural societies. Borghi emphasized that education should be a tool for emancipation, not merely for the transmission of knowledge, but for cultivating critical awareness and active citizenship (Borghi, 1973). Like Freire, Borghi believed in the power of education to challenge societal norms and inequities, encouraging learners to reflect on their own cultural and social contexts. His notion of "educazione democratica" (democratic education) underscores the role of dialogue and participation as essential elements in fostering cohesive, inclusive and just societies. For Borghi, education is inherently political, and its transformative power lies in its capacity to break down barriers between individuals and cultures, promoting mutual understanding and respect. In multicultural settings, this means equipping learners not only with knowledge but also with the tools to critically engage with and reshape the world around them, building bridges between diverse communities and contributing to the creation of a more democratic and equitable global society. Education should serve as a vehicle for fostering democratic dialogue, creating spaces where diverse voices can come together in pursuit of a cohesive and inclusive society.

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In an era of large-scale migrations and globalization, stratified societies face unprecedented challenges in fostering social and cultural coexistence. This requires both individual and collective efforts to promote constructive dialogue and prevent societal fractures. As Bauman (2000) discusses in the context of "liquid modernity", rapid and unpredictable changes fuel uncertainty and instability. Education, therefore, must equip individuals with not only cognitive but also relational, emotional, and dialogical competencies.

These skills are essential for addressing conflicts, reconciling different perspectives, negotiating meanings, and ultimately finding common ground. According to Habermas (1981), communicative action becomes critical in such societies, where discourse and shared reasoning are required to build mutual understanding. The development of these dialogical and emotional tools is also underscored by Nussbaum (2010), who highlights the importance of cultivating empathy and ethical reasoning in global citizens. In line with the transformative learning theory, education in this context becomes a process of critical reflection and action, enabling learners to engage with and transform their social environments. The ability to confront and resolve conflicts, negotiate cultural meanings, and build shared values is not only a personal skill but a social imperative in our interconnected world. Martha Nussbaums (1997) work on "cultivating humanity" reiterates that developing emotional and ethical capacities is essential for navigating the moral and social complexities of global societies.

Challenging dominant epistemologies: postcolonial, decolonial and intercultural studies on the transformative power of education

As articulated by Mezirow (1991), transformative learning emphasizes critical self-reflection, urging learners to question their deeply ingrained beliefs and societal assumptions. This process of critical reassessment enables learners to break free from normative perspectives, creating space for more inclusive and expansive understandings of the world (Melacarne, Fabbri, 2022). Transformative learning converges significantly with postcolonial and decolonial studies, both of which are committed to challenging dominant epistemologies and creating spaces for marginalized voices. In the context of these fields, transformative learning becomes a powerful tool for dismantling the legacies of colonialism that continue to shape education, knowledge production, and societal structures (Mezirow, 1991; Quijano, 2000).

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In Italian literature and academic discussions, postcolonial and decolonial studies are sometimes conflated, with their specific differences often overlooked. While both fields share a common goal of critiquing colonialism, they stem from distinct intellectual traditions and focus on different facets of colonial legacies. Recognizing these distinctions is essential for understanding their unique contributions to educational theory. Postcolonial studies emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, following the wave of decolonization across Asia, Africa, and other regions previously under colonial rule. Scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak were at the forefront of this intellectual movement, critiquing the ways in which Western imperial powers perpetuated harmful, distorted representations of colonized peoples through literature, academia, and politics (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988). For example, Said's foundational work Orientalism (1978) exposed how Western representations of "the East" were far from neutral; rather, they served to justify colonial domination by portraying Eastern societies as backward or exotic. In essence, postcolonial studies examine the cultural, ideological, and intellectual legacies of empire, with a strong focus on issues of identity, representation, and power dynamics, demonstrating how these legacies continue to shape global relations today (Said, 1978).

Decolonial studies, however, have a different genealogy, with roots in Latin American intellectual traditions. Scholars such as Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo argue that colonialism was not just a historical period but a persistent power structure embedded in modernity, a concept known as "coloniality" (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011). This framework critiques how global economic, political, and epistemological systems remain deeply shaped by colonial power structures long after formal decolonization. Quijano's theory of the coloniality of power and Mignolo's call for "de-linking from Eurocentric knowledge systems" emphasize the need for a more radical restructuring of these systems. Unlike postcolonial studies, which often critique Western intellectual traditions from within, decolonial scholars advocate for a complete break from Eurocentrism, proposing alternative ways of knowing rooted in Indigenous and non-Western epistemologies (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2000). While postcolonial and decolonial studies both critique colonialis's enduring effects, they diverge in their approach. Postcolonial scholars often engage with and critique Western intellectual frameworks, whereas decolonial thinkers push for a fundamental shift away from these paradigms, highlighting the need to deconstruct global systems that continue to privilege Western epistemologies (Mignolo, 2011). Understanding these differences is key to addressing how colonialism's legacies manifest in the present and imagining more equitable futures. The

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implications of postcolonial and decolonial studies for education are profound, particularly in how they shape our understanding of knowledge production and the role of education in either reinforcing or challenging hegemonic structures. In the context of postcolonial theory, education can be seen as a tool that has historically been used to perpetuate colonial ideologies. For example, the dominance of Western literature, history, and philosophies in curricula around the world often reflects the legacies of imperialism, privileging Western knowledge systems while marginalizing non-Western perspectives (Said, 1978). Postcolonial scholars argue that education must be reoriented to challenge these dominant narratives and include a more pluralistic and inclusive range of voices (Spivak, 1988). From a decolonial perspective, education has the potential to dismantle these colonial legacies entirely by "de-linking" from Eurocentric paradigms (Mignolo, 2011). Decolonial education encourages learners to engage with Indigenous and non-Western epistemologies, offering alternative ways of understanding the world that do not privilege Western knowledge. This shift requires not only the inclusion of marginalized voices in the curriculum but also a fundamental restructuring of how knowledge is produced, validated, and disseminated in educational institutions (Quijano, 2000). Education systems informed by decolonial and postcolonial frameworks can foster transformative learning by helping students critically examine the origins of the knowledge they consume and recognize the power dynamics involved in its dissemination (Mezirow, 1991). When learners are encouraged to question the epistemic foundations of their education and to consider alternative perspectives, they begin to challenge the structures that uphold inequality and oppression (Freire, 1970). In this way, transformative learning becomes a tool for social justice, empowering individuals to critically engage with the world around them and work towards creating more equitable and inclusive educational practices (Freire, 1970). Incorporating postcolonial and decolonial approaches into education also underscores the need for intercultural competence. As James A. Banks (2009) highlights, education that values diversity and promotes critical engagement with multiple cultural perspectives helps foster global citizenship and a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of different identities. Such an approach aligns with the principles of transformative learning, which encourages learners to reflect critically on their cultural frames of reference while appreciating the diversity of human experiences (Mezirow, 1991). Integrating postcolonial and decolonial theories into education challenges the dominant systems of knowledge production that have long excluded or marginalized non-Western voices. This not only enhances the transformative potential of education but also promotes a more just and equitable world, where learners are

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empowered to recognize and dismantle the lingering effects of colonialism on their societies and themselves. In the realm of education, particularly in schools that adopt intercultural approaches, these frameworks offer powerful insights into the complexities of identity and power relations. Educators who apply postcolonial or decolonial lenses can help students critically engage with the ways in which colonial histories continue to shape societal structures, curricula, and educational practices. Intercultural approaches, when informed by these theories, encourage dialogue between different cultural perspectives, helping students to recognize how race, class, and gender are intertwined in experiences of privilege and marginalization. This kind of critical engagement fosters transformative learning, a concept that emerges from thinkers like Paulo Freire, and promotes a deep reflection on one's own cultural assumptions while embracing diversity as a source of enrichment. Decolonial thinkers of the last century, such as Frantz Fanon (1963), Gayatri Spivak (1988), and Edward Said (1978), have emphasized the role that education plays in perpetuating colonial ideologies, noting that global education systems often prioritize Western knowledge while marginalizing or erasing indigenous and non-Western ways of knowing. Spivak's notion of the "subaltern" encapsulates this dynamic, referring to the ways in which colonized and oppressed peoples are silenced or rendered invisible in dominant discourses. In educational contexts, both postcolonial and decolonial perspectives encourage educators and students to critically reflect on these power imbalances, aiming to make space for diverse epistemologies and voices that have historically been excluded. For all these reasons, adopting intercultural approaches in schools not only advances the goals of decolonial and postcolonial education but also fosters a learning environment where students from different cultural backgrounds can engage in meaningful dialogue and exchange. Scholars such as James A. Banks argue that intercultural education helps learners develop a pluralistic worldview by challenging ethnocentric biases and recognizing the interconnectedness of global identities. Both Walter Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano emphasize the importance of decolonizing curricula, which involves recognizing the lingering influence of "coloniality" in shaping knowledge systems and hierarchies. This approach aligns with the principles of transformative learning, which encourages students to reflect critically on their own cultural frames of reference while learning from the lived experiences of others. By their inclusion in education, schools can create more inclusive educational spaces that challenge dominant narratives and encourage critical engagement with issues of race, ethnicity, and power. At the same time, this transformation of education calls on educators as they have to ensure that a range of epistemologies – especially those marginalized

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by colonialism – are represented in the classroom, fostering a more holistic and just educational experience.

A further step: decolonizing the education system adopting a feminist perspective

When transformative learning is combined with postcolonial, decolonial, and intercultural approaches, it provides students with the tools to critically examine colonial biases embedded in educational content and to understand the broader social and political structures that perpetuate inequality. This process of unlearning not only empowers students but also contributes to the creation of more equitable and inclusive educational institutions. Feminist educators like bell hooks and Elizabeth Ellsworth echo these sentiments, advocating for pedagogical practices that foreground the experiences of marginalized groups and disrupt entrenched hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Through this lens, education becomes a powerful vehicle for both personal and societal transformation, equipping students to challenge and reshape the systems of power that shape their world. Adding a feminist perspective deepens the conversation around transformative learning by recognizing that power dynamics, particularly gender-based inequalities, profoundly shape educational experiences. Feminist pedagogues such as bell hooks (1994) and Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) have critiqued traditional education systems for perpetuating hierarchies of power, especially through patriarchal and hegemonic structures. In their critiques, they argue that traditional educational models not only replicate but reinforce societal power imbalances. This perpetuation of hierarchies, particularly regarding gender, race, and class, stifles true intellectual and personal growth, which transformative education should ideally foster. These scholars emphasize that education should not only promote critical thinking and dialogue but also actively work to dismantle existing power relations. bell hooks, in particular, stresses that engaged pedagogy involves a shared responsibility between teachers and students, where both parties engage in co-constructing knowledge. This is not simply a call for more interactive or student-centered teaching; rather, it requires an intentional focus on breaking down oppressive structures that marginalize certain voices in the classroom, particularly women, people of color, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In a feminist educational framework, dialogue is not merely an intellectual exercise. Instead, it is seen as an embodied practice – one that considers the lived experiences of marginalized individuals. According to bell hooks, learning is a communal act, and the classroom should serve as a site for

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empowerment and resistance. Her idea of education goes beyond the transmission of knowledge, advocating for spaces where students can freely express their experiences and where these experiences are validated as part of the learning process. This approach fosters an environment where students can critically engage with the material and feel empowered to question and challenge dominant narratives that exclude or marginalize them. By integrating these insights into educational practices, hooks' approach challenges the traditional, hierarchical teacher-student relationship. She advocates for collaborative learning where power is shared, allowing both teachers and students to grow and evolve together. This makes the educational process not only a site of intellectual development but also one of personal and social transformation. hooks' vision of education is one where learning is a radical act, deeply intertwined with social justice.

Her focus on community, inclusivity, and the co-creation of knowledge empowers students to challenge oppressive structures and work toward collective liberation. This approach enriches and complements transformative learning theories, making education a powerful tool for both individual growth and societal change. The feminist emphasis on collaborative learning and breaking down hierarchical structures complements Mezirow's concept of transformative learning, which is centered on self-reflection and the re-examination of one's own assumptions. However, feminist pedagogy extends this further by recognizing that one's ability to challenge and reconstruct frames of reference is often hindered by deeply entrenched social inequalities. hooks and others assert that if these inequalities are not actively addressed in the classroom, students from marginalized groups may never fully experience the transformative potential of education. The work of Paulo Freire similarly intersects with feminist perspectives by framing education as a political act that challenges oppressive structures. Freire's (1970) "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" calls for an education that empowers individuals to recognize and resist the systems of power that marginalize them. Feminist theory extends this by emphasizing the specific ways in which gender oppression operates within educational settings and society at large. Freire's pedagogy, while focused on class struggles, provides a foundation for feminist scholars to explore how gender, as well as other social markers such as race and class, play a central role in shaping educational experiences. In the context of gender, feminist pedagogy critiques not only the content of traditional curricula but also the very structure of how knowledge is imparted and validated. Feminist scholars argue that classrooms should aim to dismantle gendered power structures and promote equity, particularly in terms of access to education, representation within curricula, and the development of content that is reflective of diverse

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experiences and contributions, including those of women. By engaging in this process, education moves from being a neutral or depoliticized space to becoming a site of activism and transformative change. Feminist pedagogy also offers tools for addressing the intersections of gender, race, and culture, making it especially relevant in complex multicultural environments. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) introduction of the concept of intersectionality is pivotal here, as it helps explain how overlapping social identities, such as race, gender, and class, create unique experiences of oppression. In Crenshaw's view, and as applied by feminist educators, recognizing these intersections is key to understanding how power dynamics function both in the classroom and in broader society. Thus, education that acknowledges and integrates this understanding can be profoundly transformative, allowing learners to critically examine the systems of power that shape both their own lives and the world around them. Moreover, hooks reminds us that education as a transformative practice is not a purely intellectual pursuit. It is deeply emotional, relational, and contextual. A feminist approach to education insists that we consider the emotional labor of learning and teaching, particularly for those who have been historically marginalized. In this way, education becomes not only a process of knowledge acquisition but also a healing practice – one where individuals can reclaim their voices and identities, making it truly transformative on both personal and societal levels.

Autonomous thinking: transformative and reflective learning from childhood to adult education

The foundations for autonomous thinking are often laid in childhood, where individuals learn to recognize cause-and-effect relationships, use logic, control emotions, and empathize with others.

Adolescents may develop the ability to think hypothetically and critically reflect on the information they encounter. As adults, learners must build on these foundations to critically assess their own assumptions and those of others, recognize different perspectives, and collaborate effectively in problem-solving. Transformative learning may take different forms for adults, depending for instance on whether the learner is reframing their perspective objectively or subjectively. To facilitate transformative learning, educators need to help learners become aware of their assumptions and use their imaginations to redefine problems. Learners should also be encouraged to engage in discourse, as learning is a social process.

Effective discourse involves creating an environment where learners can participate equally, challenge assumptions, and make reflective judgments.

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Children, much like adults, can benefit from transformative learning experiences. These experiences help children develop critical thinking skills and challenge the preconceived notions they may have internalized from their immediate surroundings. For instance, the work of Dewey (1938) emphasizes the importance of experience and reflection in learning, proposing that education should not be about passive absorption of information, but rather about active engagement with the world. In childhood education, this means creating environments where children are encouraged to explore, ask questions, and reflect on their learning.

Autonomous Thinking in Childhood: Autonomous thinking refers to the ability to make independent judgments and decisions, free from external authority. In childhood, fostering autonomous thinking is crucial for the development of self-regulation and responsible decision-making. According to Piaget (1954), children progress through stages of cognitive development that enable them to think more independently as they grow older. By encouraging children to reflect on their thoughts and actions, educators can cultivate a sense of agency and critical thinking in young learners, which are key components of autonomous thinking.

The Role of Education in Developing Autonomy: Education plays a fundamental role in promoting both transformative learning and autonomous thinking. Freire's (1970) "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" emphasizes education as a practice of freedom, where learners are encouraged to question and critically reflect on their reality. In a childhood context, this translates into educational practices that empower children to take control of their learning, fostering not only academic skills but also the ability to think autonomously. Under these premises, transformative theory is characterized by its emphasis on non-predetermined adaptability, offering methodological tools that empower adult learners to navigate environments marked by high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity.

This adaptability enables learners to access alternative interpretations of their feelings and behavioral patterns, allowing for a critical negotiation of existing meaning frameworks that have shaped their lives. As they engage with these frameworks, learners can replace or reorganize old perspectives, facilitating the incorporation of new, sometimes non-systematic ideas. Such transformative experiences can lead to profound personal and social changes, particularly when individuals come to recognize how deeply ingrained psychological and cultural assumptions have conditioned their reliance on forces they once deemed immutable (Mezirow, 2003). The transformative reflective process fosters not only an increased awareness of the contextual factors that influence beliefs and emotions but also encourages a critical examination of the underlying assumptions that guide those beliefs. This

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reflective journey often culminates in the conscious decision to reject outdated perspectives, adopt new ones, or create a synthesis that harmonizes both. Through this process, learners develop a capacity for action rooted in their transformed perspectives, allowing them to integrate their evolving insights into their broader life contexts (Aiello-Cabrera, Chiappelli, Troya Porras, 2023). This perspective transformation serves to strengthen their sense of self, enrich their understanding of the intricate ways in which social relations and cultural influences shape their beliefs and emotions, and provide them with more effective strategies and resources for action. By promoting an active engagement with learning materials and environments, educators can help students develop the skills necessary to navigate complex social challenges and embrace lifelong learning (D'Amore, Consonni, 2015).

Transformative and reflective learning for social integration, with a focus on gender dimension and interculturality

In the context of integrating children in vulnerable conditions, for instance children with migrant background, refugee, from marginalized families or groups, into educational systems, transformative learning and feminist pedagogies emerge as essential frameworks that can significantly enhance the educational experience. The inclusion of these learners presents unique challenges for educational institutions, compelling them to adapt to new cultural and social environments that may differ markedly from their own (Sordé-Martí et al., 2023). As highlighted in the research conducted by Fassetta (2015), traditional educational practices within host countries frequently fall short in addressing the specific needs of migrant students. These inadequacies often manifest in a failure to promote genuine inclusion and social integration, leaving migrant students to grapple with cultural misunderstandings and systemic biases largely on their own. Such circumstances can exacerbate feelings of alienation and marginalization, hindering the educational outcomes and social development of these students. The existing literature on intercultural adaptation underscores the necessity of implementing inclusive educational practices that promote social integration through critical reflection and open dialogue. Transformative learning encourages students to not only critically examine the dominant cultural norms of their host society but also to engage in a reflective process regarding their own cultural identities and assumptions. This approach is crucial for fostering an environment where all students, regardless of their background, can find common ground and mutual understanding. Moreover, integrating a feminist perspective into education

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becomes imperative, particularly in addressing the gendered experiences of migrant children (Autiero, Nese, 2023). This perspective emphasizes the need to challenge deeply ingrained gender stereotypes that disproportionately affect girls and women, as well as recognizing the intersectionality of various identities that influence each individual's experience in the educational setting. In these complex educational contexts, fostering autonomous and critical thinking emerges as a fundamental strategy for promoting social justice and inclusion. Educators and teachers must empower all students to reflect on their personal experiences, question societal assumptions, and cultivate the skills required to thrive in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world (Fabbri, Bracci, F., Romano, 2021). John Dewey (1916) argued that education is the cornerstone of democracy; however, in today's multicultural societies, it is equally vital that education serves as the foundation for equity and inclusion. By fostering environments where students can critically engage with their surroundings, challenge existing power dynamics, and develop a deeper understanding of both their own identities and those of their peers, educational institutions can play a transformative role in shaping a more inclusive future. The integration of transformative learning and feminist pedagogies not only enhances the educational experience of migrant children but also enriches the entire educational community, paving the way for a more just and equitable society. The emancipatory trajectory of transformative theory and research encompasses a rich tapestry of interests that not only seek the liberation of individuals and community niches but also endeavor to reshape the very processes, routines, and practices that often obstruct personal and collective growth. This theoretical framework aims to amplify the voices of marginalized communities, uncovering the privileges that sustain certain power structures and perpetuate systemic inequalities (Romano, 2016). As an "intersectional" field, transformative theory is uniquely positioned at the crossroads of diverse learning theories, illuminating the complex configurations that emerge from the interplay of various structural, social, and identity factors that subject individuals to oppression (Mezirow, 2003).

Conclusions

Transformative and reflective learning – enriched by decolonial, intersectional-feminist and intercultural approaches – offers a powerful framework for fostering social cohesion and critical consciousness in contemporary multicultural societies. By promoting critical reflection, intercultural competence, and the dismantling of oppressive power

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structures, education can become a tool for social change, empowering individuals to navigate and influence the globalized world in which they live. As we face unprecedented levels of diversity and cultural complexity, it is essential that education systems adapt to meet the needs of all learners, equipping them to build more just and inclusive societies. In essence, transformative and reflective learning within a postcolonial-decolonial framework, adopting a feminist and intercultural perspective, is about empowering individuals and communities to critique and move beyond oppressive knowledge systems. It encourages all learners, with specific attention to question the origins of the knowledge they are consuming, recognize the global inequalities in the production and dissemination of knowledge, and work towards creating more inclusive, equitable, and socially just educational practices.

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