

The Social Legacy of Colonialism in British Secondary State Education

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Ensayo

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Abstract: This essay explores how Britain's colonial legacy continues to shape its contemporary secondary state education system. Drawing on historical analysis, political theory, and cultural critique, it argues that colonial administrative structures, bureaucratic hierarchies, and ideological frameworks persist in current school governance. Through a comparative approach—specifically analysing both British and French colonial systems—it highlights how differing models of governance, cultural assimilation, and economic exploitation have produced distinct educational legacies. Key findings reveal that the centralised authority, rigid hierarchical decision-making, and examination-driven curricula of British schools closely mirror colonial governance structures designed for control rather than empowerment. The essay draws direct links between these historical legacies and contemporary educational challenges, including curriculum overload, excessive testing regimes, teacher shortages, and systemic inequities. It concludes with concrete recommendations for decolonising education through structural reform, curriculum redesign, teacher and student empowerment, and alternative assessment models. By tracing the enduring influence of colonial logics in school leadership, knowledge systems, and institutional cultures, this work offers a framework for understanding and transforming the persistent colonial residues that obstruct educational progress and perpetuate social inequality in 21st-century Britain.

Keywords: colonialism; education; bureaucracy; cultural narrative.

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El legado social del colonialismo en la educación secundaria pública británica

Resumen: Este ensayo explora cómo el legado colonial británico continúa moldeando su sistema contemporáneo de educación secundaria estatal. A partir del análisis histórico, la teoría política y la crítica cultural, sostiene que las estructuras administrativas coloniales, las jerarquías burocráticas y los marcos ideológicos persisten en la gobernanza escolar actual. Mediante un enfoque comparativo —específicamente, analizando tanto los sistemas coloniales británico como francés— se destaca cómo los diferentes modelos de gobierno, de asimilación cultural y de explotación económica han producido legados educativos distintos. Los principales hallazgos revelan que la autoridad centralizada, la toma de decisiones rígidamente jerárquica y los planes de estudio orientados a los exámenes en las escuelas británicas reflejan estrechamente las estructuras de gobierno colonial diseñadas para el control más que para el empoderamiento. El ensayo establece vínculos directos entre estos legados históricos y los desafíos educativos contemporáneos, incluidos la sobrecarga curricular, los regímenes excesivos de pruebas, la escasez de docentes y las inequidades sistémicas. Concluye con recomendaciones concretas para descolonizar la educación mediante la reforma estructural, el rediseño curricular, el empoderamiento de docentes y estudiantes, y la implementación de modelos alternativos de evaluación. Al rastrear la influencia perdurable de las lógicas coloniales en el liderazgo escolar, los sistemas de conocimiento y las culturas institucionales, este trabajo ofrece un marco para comprender y transformar los persistentes residuos coloniales que obstaculizan el progreso educativo y perpetúan la desigualdad social en la Gran Bretaña del siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: colonialismo; educación; burocracia; narrativa cultural.

1. Introduction

The structure and operation of England's 21st-century secondary state school system exhibit striking continuities with the administrative logics of the British colonial state (Loomba, 2005). These are not merely historical residues, but active structural determinants shaping educational policy, school governance, classroom practices, and student experiences. As noted in the 2023 House of Lords Committee report, the system suffers from “an overloaded curriculum, a disproportionate exam burden and declining opportunities to articulate creative and technical subjects” (House of Lords, 2023, para. 2). These challenges are rooted not only in recent policy choices but also in a failure to dismantle colonial-era institutional frameworks.

The British Empire built bureaucratic systems prioritising central control, efficiency, and standardisation—often at the expense of local needs or democratic engagement (Fieldhouse,

1981). These traits persist in current school governance models such as Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs), which resemble colonial district officers in their top-down imposition of policy and their reliance on performance metrics over holistic educational values (Ball, 2013). The parallels extend to curricula, assessment regimes, and teacher roles, which remain heavily constrained by hierarchical directives.

This paper argues that Britain's continued inability to comprehensively reform its education system stems largely from the enduring influence of these colonial frameworks.

The essay begins with this introduction that outlines the central thesis, which is then developed through theoretical and historical analysis. It proceeds by exploring the significance of *Culture and Imperialism* as conceptual tools for understanding colonial influence on education.

Subsequently, the paper engages in a comparative analysis between colonial bureaucratic structures and the current secondary state school system in England, identifying key continuities and divergences. This is followed by a detailed comparison of the British and French colonial education systems, focusing on how different imperial strategies have shaped the evolution of their respective national school models.

2. Culture and Imperialism: Impacts on Secondary State Education

Colonial governance functioned by conceptually separating coloniser and colonised within a framework of *alterity*, legitimising domination through constructed cultural binaries. As Said (1993) argues, imperialism operated not only through political and economic means but also via cultural representations that sustained this division. In contemporary UK schools, while cultural and social spaces are ostensibly shared, residual logics of alterity continue to clash with democratic ideals—often resulting in institutional dysfunction.

One of the strongest connections between culture and imperialism is narrative power. In the imperial context, narratives frequently substituted for direct control, becoming tools of domination. In education, a similar phenomenon occurs; school leaders impose official narratives to suppress dissent and consolidate authority. In this way, “Super Heads” and their leadership teams function as modern equivalents of imperial administrators, crafting ideological structures that suppress alternative voices.

Moreover, cultural experiences of imperialism helped institutionalise entities such as school Trusts—organisations that manage educational, social, and economic functions not unlike the East India Company. These institutions reproduce the colonial impulse to manage through centralised power structures and overarching narratives. As Said contends, “The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to

culture and imperialism” (Said, 1993). While narrative can elevate culture, when tethered to national or institutional identity, it can obscure or suppress critical discourse.

Foucault’s concept of governmentality—defined as “the conduct of conduct”—is relevant here. Foucault posits that liberal states control citizens through mechanisms that encourage autonomy and self-regulation (Lemke, 2007). In schools, culture becomes a regulated field of power: school identity is forged through competitive narratives (e.g., school league tables) that encourage rivalry over education, shifting focus from learning to market-based performance.

This manipulation of school missions and values leads to a constant flux in educational discourse. Yet it raises the question: does this narrative instability serve the higher aims of education?

Cross-national comparisons in teacher training underscore systemic differences. In countries like Germany, France, and Finland, preparation programs are extensive and rigorous. In contrast, the UK offers shorter, often more intense routes to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), such as the Teach First programme, which places trainees in low-income schools for two years while completing certification. While the scheme has drawn praise for attracting high-achieving graduates, it has also been criticised for its pressure on trainees.

Concerns about workload, pay, and well-being persist among UK teachers (The Guardian, 2024). These working conditions reflect the continuation of a system rooted in hierarchical control—further entrenching inequality.

The imperial pattern of controlling culture through narrative to maintain dominance is echoed in today’s educational structures, which shape school culture, curriculum, and pedagogy.

Reay (2024), drawing on Andy Green’s comparative work, identifies England as a clear case where education was designed by dominant classes to preserve their social and economic position. Green notes that from its inception, state education for the working class offered a lower-quality curriculum aimed at enforcing obedience (Reay, 2024). Johnson (1976) similarly described this goal as training the working classes in habitual submission.

Contemporary sociologists such as Friedman and Laurison (2019); Reeves et al. (2017) show that social mobility remains restricted, with elite professions still dominated by those from privileged educational backgrounds. Their concept of the “class ceiling” underscores how historical educational models—designed to sort by class—continue to shape professional outcomes. Eliot (1948) succinctly noted in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* that the purpose of schooling is to preserve the class and select the elite.

As a result, many working-class students experience schooling more as a site of exclusion than of opportunity. This sense of alienation is particularly evident among white working-class boys, who often view education as irrelevant (Stahl, 2015; Willis, 1977).

3. Conceptual Framework: Colonialism, Culture, and Power

This section explores the ideological and cultural dimensions of imperialism and how these legacies persist in the contemporary British state education system. Drawing on Edward Said's (1993) theory of culture as a vehicle for ideological control, it is argued that modern education continues to reproduce colonial narratives through centralised authority, hierarchical power structures, and exclusionary discourses. Said (1993) conceptualises culture as consisting of representational practices—such as description, communication, and narrative—that appear politically neutral but in fact reinforce and legitimise imperial systems.

A central theme in this analysis is the strategic use of narrative as a tool of empire. Said (1993) contends that within imperial contexts, narrative often operated more effectively than military power in shaping perceptions, behaviours, and social relations. In the context of education, this phenomenon is reflected in the authority wielded by Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs) and Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), which enforce policy agendas and suppress critical perspectives in ways reminiscent of colonial administrators maintaining ideological and political control (Ball, 2013; Whitehead, 2003).

The concept of governmentality, developed by Michel Foucault, further illuminates how modern liberal states exercise indirect yet pervasive forms of control. Foucault suggests that governance operates by guiding individuals to regulate their own behaviour through the internalisation of institutional goals and norms (Lemke, 2007). In the school context, this manifests through performance-driven cultures, aggressive data tracking, and competitive league tables, all of which compel conformity under the guise of professional autonomy.

Teacher training offers additional evidence of these ideological continuities. While countries such as Germany, France, and Finland emphasise long-term, rigorous preparation for educators, the UK has increasingly adopted fast-track models—such as *Teach First*—that prioritise efficiency and output over depth of pedagogical development. These models have been criticised for their intensity, insufficient support, and alignment with neoliberal objectives (The Guardian, 2024).

The colonial legacy is also evident in the literary curriculum. Literature has historically served both as a mechanism of imperial dominance and as a medium for resistance. Viswanathan (as cited in Loomba, 2005) argues that English literary studies were instrumentalised during the colonial period to provide a cultural rationale for political and

economic control. Yet postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha highlight how the incomplete transmission of imperial values allowed space for subversion. For instance, anti-colonial thinkers like Lala Hardayal reinterpreted canonical texts such as *The Tempest* and *The Merchant of Venice* to challenge British imperial authority (Loomba, 2005).

These enduring ideological frameworks continue to shape educational governance in England today. Hierarchical leadership structures, data-driven accountability systems, and excessive bureaucratic monitoring have reduced teacher autonomy and alienated both students and families from the learning process (Ball, 2013; Whitehead, 2003). Foucault's theory of capillary power helps explain this phenomenon: control is dispersed throughout everyday institutional practices, making it difficult to locate or resist (Loomba, 2005).

To address these colonial continuities, this thesis advocates for a student-centred, inclusive, and decentralised model of education—one that critically engages with historical legacies and embraces democratic participation. A meaningful transformation requires not only pedagogical reform but also a structural reimagining of the education system itself.

Colonialism is intended as the practice by which a country establishes control over a territory and its people, often by settlement, economic exploitation, and cultural domination, while maintaining political authority from the colonising power (Loomba, 2015).

In this article, the term “education” refers specifically to institutionalised education and is also extended to encompass literary culture—particularly in discussions of cultures introduced into colonised countries, which already possessed their own Indigenous traditions.

State secondary education refers to publicly funded schooling for students typically aged 11 to 16 or 18, depending on the system. Traditionally, these schools were financed and overseen by the local education authority (local governments), which was responsible for staffing, curriculum delivery, and overall governance. In recent decades, however, many such institutions have transitioned to academy status—publicly funded but operating independently of local authority control. Academies are directly funded by the central government and have greater autonomy over curriculum design, budgets, and management structures, though they remain accountable for meeting national educational standards (Department for Education, n.d.).

Curriculum: the term most commonly used in the formal educational context to refer to the set of subjects, objectives, content and evaluation criteria of a training program.

Finally, cultural narrative is a shared story, set of ideas, or framework of meaning that a community or society uses to understand and explain its values, history, identity, and way of life. These narratives are passed down through language, traditions, media, and education, shaping how people perceive themselves and others, influencing behaviour, and reinforcing

cultural norms. They can be explicit—told through myths, literature, or historical accounts—or implicit, embedded in everyday practices and assumptions (Somers, 1994).

4. From Empire to Education: Historical Continuities

This section presents a comparative analysis of the British colonial administrative system and the contemporary UK secondary state school system. While each operates in a different historical and socio-political context, both systems share key features—such as centralised authority, rigid bureaucratic hierarchies, and limited participatory governance.

Using comparative tables, this section explores:

1. Bureaucratic Structures and Roles – outlining the hierarchy of both systems and examining how roles are defined and distributed.
2. Decision-Making Processes – analysing the levels of autonomy and top-down governance within both models.
3. Stakeholder Accountability – comparing the purpose and mechanisms of accountability, and to whom different actors are answerable.
4. Transparency and Oversight – evaluating how transparent decision-making processes are, and the extent to which institutional oversight is democratic or centralised.
5. Cultural and Social Dimensions – exploring how each system constructs identity, culture, and social norms, particularly in relation to issues of control, representation, and inclusion.

The tables that follow were developed by the author, using a flexible framework suitable for analysing postcolonial systems more broadly—whether in former colonies such as India or regions in West Africa. By maintaining consistency in structure, the analysis allows for a clearer understanding of how colonial administrative logics have been repurposed within modern educational institutions.

This comparative perspective provides the foundation for later sections, which interrogate the practical implications of these legacies and propose pathways for meaningful reform.

Table 1. Bureaucratic Structures and Roles

Level	British Colonial System	UK Secondary State School System
Central Authority	<i>Governor-General or Viceroy:</i> Represented the Crown, with overarching authority over colonies.	<i>Secretary of State for Education:</i> Sets national education policy and standards.
Regional	<i>Provincial Governors or Commissioners:</i> Implemented policy at the regional level.	<i>Local Education Authorities (LEAs) / Academy Trusts:</i> Manage school groups regionally.
Local	<i>District Collectors:</i> Oversaw local law, tax collection, and administration.	<i>Headteachers / Principals:</i> Manage daily school operations and academic outcomes.
Support Roles	<i>Clerks, Magistrates, Police, Military Officers:</i> Enforced law and governance.	<i>Deputy Heads, Admin Staff, Department Heads:</i> Support curriculum and operations.

Source: prepared by the author based on GOV.UK (2024); Parliament UK (2024); Sprint Education (2024); Testbook (2024); UK Government History Blog (2024).

Table 2. Purpose and Accountability

Aspect	British Colonial System	UK Secondary State School System
Primary Goal	Governance, control, and economic exploitation for imperial benefit.	Education, student development, and social empowerment.
Accountability	To the Crown and Parliament; little regard for local input.	To DfE, governing bodies, and local communities.

Source: prepared by the author based on Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK, 2023); American Revolution Museum (n.d.); EPI (2022); TNSR (2021).

Table 3. Decision-Making Process

Aspect	British Colonial System	UK Secondary State School System
Centralisation	Highly centralised; policies imposed from Britain.	Mixed: Central policy with localised autonomy through academies and LEAs.
Policy Creation	Policies created in Britain, often disconnected from local needs.	DfE provides national policy; local adaptations allowed, particularly for academies.

Source: prepared by the author based on Education Hub (2023); GOV.UK (2023); Parliament UK (2023).

Table 4. Bureaucratic Nature and Stakeholder Involvement

Aspect	British Colonial System	UK Secondary State School System
Purpose	Governance and resource control.	Educational delivery and student support.
Size & Scope	Broad (military, judiciary, taxation, etc.).	Narrower, focused on education.
Stakeholders	Limited inclusion of locals.	Inclusive of students, staff, parents, and the community.

Source: prepared by the author based on ERIC (2022); International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED, 2021); Moodle (2023); Oxford Research Archive (ORA, 2022); Study.com (2023).

Table 5. Accountability and Transparency

Aspect	British Colonial System	UK Secondary State School System
Oversight	Direct oversight by the British Parliament and Crown.	Managed by Ofsted ² , LEAs, and Academy Trusts.
Transparency	Limited transparency; concentrated decision-making. "Operation Legacy" destroyed records to avoid scrutiny.	High transparency, financial reports and Ofsted inspections are publicly available.

Source: prepared by the author based on Carleton University (2022); Education Hub (2023); GOV.UK (2023); Parliament UK (2023).

Table 6. Cultural and Social Dimensions

Aspect	British Colonial System	UK Secondary State School System
Cultural Focus	Imposed British norms and disregarded indigenous traditions.	Promotes inclusivity, multiculturalism, and cultural understanding.
Social Mobility	Restricted for colonised people; elite positions reserved for British personnel.	Focus on equal opportunity and narrowing attainment gaps.

Source: prepared by the author based on Metcalf (1995); Strictly Education (2023); GOV.UK (2023); Young (1994).

² Ofsted (The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) - The UK regulatory body that inspects schools and childcare providers. LEA (Local Education Authority) - A UK term for government bodies responsible for state schools in a district.

4.2. Similarities and Differences

The key differences between the British colonial system and the modern UK secondary state school system are rooted in the degree of centralisation and the purposes these systems served. Colonial administration was markedly centralised, whereas contemporary UK education allows for more local autonomy.

During British rule in India, the Governor-General—later known as the Viceroy—represented one of the most centralised forms of colonial authority in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Formally established under the Charter Act of 1833, the Governor-General exercised “superintendence, direction, and control of the whole civil and military Government” of India (Governor-General of India, n.d.). Following the transfer of power from the East India Company to the British Crown in 1858, the title “Viceroy” was adopted to emphasise the role as the monarch’s direct representative (Viceroy, n.d.). The Viceroy’s remit extended across legislative, executive, and military affairs, including foreign policy towards princely states and the administration of provinces (Prepp, n.d.). This framework enabled rapid decision-making with minimal local consultation and negligible accountability to the governed, with oversight primarily from the Secretary of State for India in London (Viceroy, n.d.).

By contrast, the modern UK Secretary of State for Education operates within a devolved democratic framework. As a member of the British Cabinet, the Secretary of State is responsible for England’s education system, covering early years provision, state schools, teacher recruitment, curriculum standards, and further and higher education. These powers are defined by statutes such as the Education Act 2011 (n.d.), with significant responsibilities delegated to local authorities, academy trusts, and regulatory bodies such as Ofsted (Edapt, n.d.). Decisions are subject to parliamentary scrutiny and must comply with the UK’s broader legal and human rights framework.

The contrast lies in the scope and centralisation of authority. The Governor-General/Viceroy wielded near-absolute power over all aspects of governance in a vast colony, operating with limited democratic checks. The Secretary of State for Education, however, exercises sector-specific authority within a pluralistic governance model that emphasises transparency, decentralisation, and accountability.

The purposes of these systems diverge fundamentally. Colonial governance was designed to serve imperial economic interests, requiring political and social policies that enabled exploitation—an approach exemplified by the East India Company’s role in India. By contrast, the state school system exists to provide education, foster individual development, safeguard children, and promote inclusiveness.

Stakeholder involvement also differs sharply. In colonial governance, the local population was entirely excluded from decision-making. In the modern education system, community engagement is not only permitted but expected and encouraged.

5. Colonial and Modern Perspectives on Governance and Alterity

The legacy of colonial governance continues to shape contemporary institutions, including educational systems. British colonial ideologies of governance and *alterity*—the construction of the “other”—are still visible in certain bureaucratic and pedagogical structures of modern UK secondary schools. Drawing on postcolonial scholarship, particularly Loomba (2015), enduring hierarchies, transparency issues, and professional challenges in education can be understood as part of this inheritance.

Colonial governance under the British Empire relied on a rigid dichotomy between colonisers and the colonised. This *alterity* framework—an “us” versus “them” mentality—enabled administrators to implement mechanisms of control under the guise of civilisation and progress (Loomba, 2005). Racial hierarchies were often reconfigured as class distinctions, with black populations relegated to working-class status while whites were framed as inherently superior.

In contemporary UK schools, this legacy is reflected in hierarchical structures where senior bureaucratic leadership oversees teachers and staff. Changes in classroom etiquette—for example, students no longer being expected to greet teachers formally—suggest altered power dynamics, but these shifts do not necessarily equate to greater social equity.

British colonialism often employed indirect rule, granting local leaders limited autonomy under strict imperial oversight (Lugard, 1922; Mamdani, 1996). Such autonomy was largely symbolic, intended to placate rather than empower. A similar tension is observable in schools today: while decision-making processes may appear inclusive—students may be invited to express opinions—these inputs rarely influence final decisions when they conflict with institutional norms or community expectations.

Colonial administrations systematically restricted the social mobility of indigenous peoples. Postcolonial theorists such as Guha (as cited in Loomba, 2005) have labelled these marginalised groups “subaltern”—a term that can also describe modern non-managerial educators and staff whose professional mobility remains constrained by structural hierarchies.

Colonial officials were accountable to the British Parliament and Crown, ensuring alignment with imperial objectives. Similarly, modern schools are overseen by Ofsted and other regulatory bodies. Until recently, Ofsted summarised school performance with single-word ratings such as “outstanding” or “inadequate.” Proposals now suggest adopting multi-

category, colour-coded report cards (Ofsted, 2024). While intended to improve fairness and transparency, critics warn that such systems may still impose excessive pressure on educators (The Times, 2024).

Colonial administrations were also notoriously opaque, as seen in “Operation Legacy,” where sensitive documents were destroyed to conceal abuses (Loomba, 2005). Modern schools, in contrast, are expected to maintain transparency by publishing Ofsted reports and financial accounts. Nevertheless, recent consultations have identified persistent gaps in accountability—particularly within academy trusts—prompting calls for greater financial scrutiny (EPI, 2024).

Financial pressures remain a significant challenge. Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies indicates that recent increases in school funding primarily offset rising operational costs rather than enhance educational quality (NGA, 2024). Under such constraints, schools often prioritise meeting accountability metrics over providing holistic education.

Teachers, like colonial intermediaries described by Said (1993), must navigate bureaucratic demands that can compromise their core mission. These pressures—combined with undervaluation and increasing workloads—contribute to high levels of burnout and staff shortages.

Despite clear differences in intent and governance between the colonial system and modern UK secondary education, the structural legacy of centralised, hierarchical control persists. This raises critical questions:

- Is reform hindered by ignorance of the evidence? Unlikely, given numerous official reports acknowledging current problems (House of Lords, 2023).
- Is there systemic resistance to change? Possibly, due to institutional inertia or conflicting incentives.
- Could corruption be a factor? While evidence is lacking, the question is relevant for ensuring transparency and public trust.

The paradox is clear: while educational systems aim to foster empowerment and equity, their structures may still echo mechanisms originally designed for control. True reform must address these embedded patterns to build a genuinely democratic and inclusive education system—one that dismantles inherited inequalities rather than reproducing them.

6. British vs. French Colonial Governance Models

Although both Britain and France were dominant imperial powers, their colonial governance strategies diverged in significant ways. Continuing with a comparative

methodology, this section examines the similarities and differences in their approaches to rule and the legacies evident in their postcolonial educational systems.

Table 7. Comparative Overview of British and French Colonial Education Systems

Aspect	British Colonial System	French Colonial System
Governance Philosophy	Decentralised; indirect rule	Centralised; direct rule
Administration	Flexible; varied by region	Uniform; Paris-controlled
Legal System	Dual system (customary + British law)	Uniform French civil law
Cultural Policy	Limited assimilation	Aggressive assimilation
Economic Model	Private exploitation	State-controlled extraction
Postcolonial Legacy	Diverse, flexible systems	Centralised, French-oriented systems

Source: prepared by the author based on Betts (1961); Conklin (1997); Crowder (1968); Fieldhouse (1982); Porter (1999).

The British model of indirect rule permitted local customs and leaders to maintain nominal authority, creating a patchwork of governance structures across colonies. In contrast, the French approach emphasised direct rule and the imposition of uniformity, with the explicit goal of transforming colonised populations into assimilated French citizens. This assimilationist policy sought to eliminate cultural distinctions in favour of a centralised French identity.

Despite these methodological differences, both systems produced comparable postcolonial educational outcomes. In the British case, schools retained hierarchical but decentralised structures shaped by enduring influences of class and race. French schools, while committed in principle to republican ideals of equality, often face persistent challenges in inclusivity and cultural integration.

British schools tend to demonstrate greater tolerance for diversity but are less proactive in dismantling systemic inequities. By contrast, French schools, grounded in assimilationist ideology, frequently struggle to accommodate cultural differences in practice.

Both colonial systems relied on ideological narratives to legitimise their dominance. As Said (1978) observes, these narratives positioned colonisers as culturally and morally

superior, reinforcing structures of control. This mindset continues to influence modern educational hierarchies, where authority is concentrated among administrative elites.

British policy often relied on elite intermediaries educated in English, creating a narrow pathway for upward mobility (Ashcroft et al., 1989). The selective promotion of English language and culture sustained colonial hierarchies while maintaining an appearance of meritocracy.

The governance structures of UK secondary schools, though rebranded and modernised, continue to exhibit features reminiscent of colonial administration. Bureaucratic oversight, entrenched hierarchies, and limited transparency persist, reflecting the structural legacy of imperial governance.

A comparative analysis with French educational systems reveals that, although the colonial strategies differed—British decentralised indirect rule versus French centralised assimilation—their legacies share key outcomes: the maintenance of control, the marginalisation of certain groups, and the selective inclusion of others.

Addressing these legacies requires more than superficial policy adjustments. It calls for a fundamental reimagining of governance, transparency, and inclusion—rooted in equitable, decolonised frameworks that actively dismantle inherited systems of exclusion.

7. Conclusions

The persistence of inequality within the UK education system cannot be understood in isolation from its imperial heritage. As Said (1993) reminds us, “imperialism... lingers where it has been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices” (p. 9). The logic of *alterity* that underpinned colonial governance—positioning certain groups as requiring control, direction, and “civilisation”—finds renewed expression in contemporary educational structures. Performance-driven accountability frameworks, centralised leadership hierarchies, and prescriptive behaviour management models such as SLANT (Sit Up, Listen, Ask Questions, Nod, Track the Speaker), impose a uniformity of conduct and thought that disadvantages learners whose cultural backgrounds or educational needs deviate from the “ideal” student profile (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022). This reflects a continuation of colonial homogenisation, where difference was managed through control rather than embraced through inclusion.

Systemic underfunding of state schools, coupled with rigid curriculum mandates, further entrenches these disparities by limiting opportunities for culturally responsive and creative pedagogy (Bush & Glover, 2014; Ofsted, 2019). In this context, teachers are often incentivised to pursue leadership positions rather than remain in classroom roles (Hargreaves

& Fullan, 2012), resulting in a loss of experienced practitioners and reinforcing a hierarchy that privileges managerial authority over pedagogical expertise. In Said's (1993) terms, this dynamic reflects a "power to narrate" (p. xiii) concentrated among policy elites, restricting the emergence of alternative, community-rooted educational visions.

Addressing these inequities requires reform that tackles the deep structural biases in governance, funding, and curricular design, rather than merely adjusting surface-level performance metrics. Elevating the value of classroom teaching to parity with leadership roles, reducing bureaucratic constraints, and embedding culturally relevant curricula (Ladson-Billings, 1995) are essential steps toward an equitable education system. Without such changes, the UK risks perpetuating an educational order that, like its colonial predecessor, privileges control over genuine empowerment and innovation.

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