

READING THE WHOLE TREE:

A Reflection on Educational Inequality, Power Structures, and Educational Transformation through Decolonial Lenses and Reparations

Patrícia Santana da Silva

Master of Arts in International and Comparative Education, 2026

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Amanda Earl

Cluster: Multilingual and Decolonial Dimensions of Education

Introduction

My mother's story is no longer mine. Born in Bahia, Northeast Brazil, she dropped out of school in 4th grade to work in the fields after the death of my grandparents when she was 9. She then worked as a maid her entire life and had every reason to give up, but her dreams made her a survivor, and her faith in education kept her alive in my memory after she passed away when I was only 12.

My mother did not have the chance to pursue an education pathway, but she gave me the perseverance to find, access, and continue on this path to this day. Her story was not an exception; it was the expected outcome of systems designed to exploit labor from Black and Brown communities while denying the educational resources that could have changed that path. Understanding the difference between personal misfortune and systemic design later became the core idea of this program.

This IP Portfolio traces my intellectual journey from studying historically excluded students in Brazil to "studying up" – examining the powerful actors that shape equity discourse in education (Menashy, 2025). This tree represents both my intellectual journey through the program and the educational structures I learned to read along the way.

Evolution of Thinking

I entered this program intending to continue participatory research with Black youth in Brazil. But the deeper I engaged with the program's theoretical foundations, the more I recognized that studying those historically excluded was insufficient without interrogating the architects of their exclusion.

Multilingual and Decolonial Dimensions of Education

My concentration in the Multilingual and Decolonial Dimensions of Education cluster reflected my belief that systemic change requires both diverse voices in decision-making spaces and scholars willing to challenge the epistemological frameworks that have historically suppressed non-Western knowledge, languages, and ways of being.

Theoretical Foundations

World-systems & dependency theory: Wallerstein (1974); applied to CIE by Griffiths (2021)
Decolonial theory: Mignolo & Walsh (2018);
Human capital theory (critique): Klees (2016); Woodhall (2001);
Liberation Theory & Critical Pedagogy: Freire & Macedo (1987)

Writing Sample I

The Roots: Beyond Equity and Reform

Format: A book review of Olúfémi O. Táíwò's *Reconsidering Reparations*
Title: "What if the Malé Revolt had succeeded?"
Course: Beyond Equity and Reform: Repair, Reparations and Educational Transformation
Professor: Dr. Bettina Love

Writing Sample II

The Trunk: Mapping Equity Discourses Using Social Network Analysis

Format: A small empirical study using social network analysis as a methodological approach to operationalize the studying-up framework.
Title: "Mapping Equity Discourses in U.S. Education Philanthropy."
Course: Social Network Analysis
Professor: Oren Pizmony-Levy, PhD

Writing Sample III

The Crown: Belonging-Centered Approaches to Education Technology

Format: Report developing the OECD's AI Literacy Framework for Primary and Secondary Education (2025), where I propose Belonging as a cross-cutting domain.
Title: "AI Literacy for Educators: A Belonging-Centered Approach to Professional Development"
Course: Equity, Ethical, and Social Issues in Educational Technology
Professor: Mark Dzula, PhD

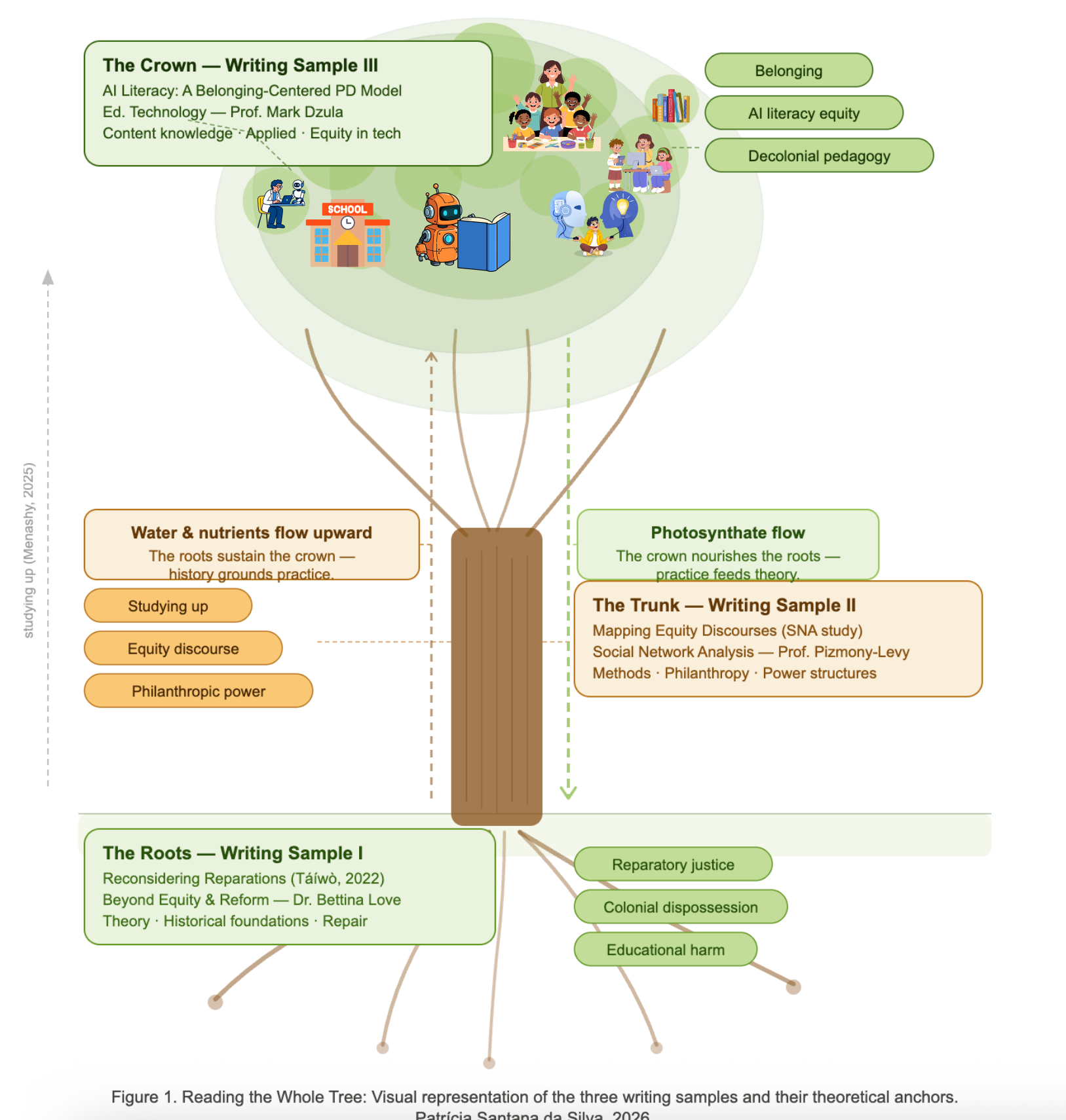
Connecting Learning to Professional and Academic Aspirations

My professional and academic work will be guided by a commitment to reparatory justice: following Táíwò's (2022) vision, not merely as acknowledgment of historical harm, but as an active, constructive project dedicated to building the new conditions necessary for genuine equity. Professionally, I am seeking to work at the systems level of transformative Pre-K-12 education, in roles such as strategy design, grants, and stakeholder engagement, and to apply decolonial dimensions and evolutionary learning approaches to education initiatives that center equity and community experiences to create and sustain more equitable educational systems.

Moving forward, I hope to be an agent in grafting new branches and planting new seeds in decolonized soil.

Reading the Whole Tree

This metaphor draws on Indigenous knowledge traditions that center nature as a living relational system: a decolonial epistemic choice. "Reading the whole tree" is inspired by Freire's & Macedo's (1987) concept of reading the world before reading the word, understanding the full structural context before addressing its visible expressions.



Conclusion

On March 25, 2026 – days before completing this reflection – the UN General Assembly declared the transatlantic slave trade a crime against humanity and called on member states to engage in reparatory justice. That 123 nations voted in favor, while other nations voted against, is not a contradiction I can set aside. It is a live demonstration of the tensions my IP Portfolio navigates: between historical acknowledgment and political will, between the language of equity and the structures that resist it. I leave with the courage to question, the tools to pursue change, and the conviction that equitable, decolonial, and transformative education is not only necessary – it is possible.

The Crown



In nature, the crown captures sunlight and produces energy through photosynthesis. This energy flows back down to nourish the trunk and roots. The crown and roots are in constant, mutual exchange.

In education, the crown represents the point where structural inputs are ultimately transformed: where policy interacts with students and teachers, and where concepts like belonging, equity-centered pedagogy, AI literacy, and agency are either fostered or neglected. This is what creates evidence that should loop back to influence governance and history. Practice informs theory, and transformation is a circular process rather than a top-down approach.

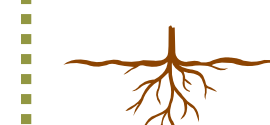
The Trunk



In nature, the trunk channels water upward from the roots and photosynthate downward from the crown. It is the **structural core** that concentrates and distributes resources across the whole tree.

In education, philanthropic organizations, governance structures, and powerful state and non-state actors shape which resources flow and whose vision of equity is amplified. Studying up (Menashy, 2025) means examining this structure.

The Roots



In nature, roots are buried and invisible, yet they anchor the entire tree. They absorb water and minerals from the soil and send them upward to sustain all growth. Without roots, nothing survives.

In education: The historical and theoretical foundations of inequality – slavery, colonial dispossession, deliberate disinvestment – are often invisible in policy but sustain every inequality above. Reparatory justice (Táíwò, 2022) begins here.



International &
Comparative Education
Teachers College, Columbia University