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Decolonising pedagogy: A critical engagement with debates in the university in South Africa

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Abstract

In 2015, universities around South Africa ground to a standstill while students called first for the fall of Rhodes and then for the fall of fees. For educational theorists such as Vygotsky (1962/1986) it is in moments of crisis that contradictions within a system become visible, forcing change in it. For Roy & Hanacek (2023) crises are portals through which we travel and effect change. Change, of course, can be progressive in the sense that one moves forward to overcome a crisis, but it can also be regressive. With the call for fees to fall, students went further and articulated a need to transform the material and epistemic foundations of the academy to reflect previously marginalised voices. In this largely theoretical paper, I develop an argument for what decolonial pedagogy could look like in context. Drawing on the work of Vygotsky (1986), Freire & Ramos (1970) and Derrida (2016) I engage with what decolonial education is, as a broad concept, before narrowing my gaze to focus specifically on pedagogy and how one can develop a decolonial pedagogy, drawing very largely on the work of Vygotsky whose transformative approach to cognitive development speaks to a transformative pedagogy.

Keywords: decolonial pedagogy; Vygotsky; teaching; learning

Introduction

An article, "Let's Talk about Diversity in Neuroscience," posted online (*Nature Methods*, 2023), calls for including diverse populations in the writing up, research and methodology of neuroscience. Women and Black people, the article argues, do not have the same coverage as white men do in the neuroscience literature or, indeed, in actual neuroscience research. While this article was published recently, it echoes the voices of students in South Africa in 2015 who called for an end to barriers to higher education that prevent marginalised groups from engaging fully in the academic project. Under the #feesmustfall banner, students across South Africa began to ask questions about knowledge in the academy. They questioned, for example, who determines what knowledge is being taught, whose knowledge is taught, and

how the voices of previously marginalised[1] people could be included in the re-development of university ways of knowing and knowledge production (Hoadley & Gallant, 2019; Motala et al., 2021; Muller, 2014). These are important questions that are being addressed in educational debates, especially at the level of Higher Education Institutions (Motala et al., 2021), where questions of epistemic erasure call into question what knowledge should be taught in academia and what and whose knowledge counts as meaningful. Of course, any debate regarding epistemic access must also speak to curricula and pedagogy—the specific focus of my paper. Teaching and learning are socio-culturally embedded and how one invites formerly silenced voices to partake in knowledge construction requires a specific kind of pedagogy (see Hedegaard, 2020; Vygotsky, 1934/1986) that I will outline in this paper. Universities in South Africa (and, in fact, around the world) are colonial edifices that espouse a specific focus on Western epistemology but the focus of decolonial debates about education have centred on material and epistemic inequalities that continue to permeate the academic spaces in South Africa (Muswede, 2017) I locate this paper in the broader decolonial literature with its specific focus on a dialectic pedagogy that, I argue, provides a mechanism for including previously marginalised knowledge through the recruitment of student voices in co-constructing meaning in relation to knowledge. I deal very specifically with the question of what a decolonial pedagogy could look like. However, I recognise that what is taught is intricately related to how it is taught, and I touch also on what knowledge counts as valuable and who makes this decision. While many debates deal with decolonising education, there is a dearth of practical examples of what a decolonial pedagogy could look like (Chiramba & Motala, 2023). This is important since teaching is the mechanism through which knowledge moves from teacher to student, and changing this praxis is not without serious challenge. It is not easy to dismantle or challenge the accepted canon in the academy that requires, first, that the academy and those within it understand what this means in a real context. Even those of us in the academy who seek to change the status quo are ourselves often products of the very system we now seek to critique (Chiramba & Motala, 2023). Understanding how pedagogy can be used to decolonise student/teacher interactions and knowledge construction is important if we are to move towards a university that not only espouses a focus on decolonial education but enacts this in lecturers' pedagogical praxes. There is many a slip between the intention to teach in specific ways and the enaction of novel pedagogical methods (Falkner et al., 2019). Relatedly, while content and pedagogy may appear to be two separate things, they are dialectically entailed, and this requires that a discussion of pedagogy must also attend to notions of what this pedagogy carries. In this theoretical paper, then, I focus on two questions:

- What can a decolonial pedagogy look like?
- What content can be taught using a decolonial pedagogy?

1 Here I refer to students/people whose voices have not been included in the colonial canon of knowledge.

The decolonial debate

This special issue of the journal focuses on debates in the education field over the past ten years. One of the current debates that emerged, perhaps more prevalently after 2016, is that about decolonising education. Numerous articles have appeared in the *Journal of Education* regarding decolonising education, from studies in mathematics (Mudaly, 2018), to pre- and in-service teaching (Sayed et al., 2017; Simmonds & Ajani, 2022), with most articles in this debate focused on decolonising curricula in higher education (Jansen & Motala 2017; le Grange, 2018; Mudaly, 2018; Seyama, 2019). The notion of decolonising education, then, has a research base in South Africa. What, though, is meant by the term "decolonial": is it, as Long suggests (2018) merely a hollow signifier or is it some kind of transcendental signifier whose meaning is fixed and known? In my reading of Long, it is neither hollow, nor sufficiently populated to be fixed across contexts. This is not to say it cannot be defined, but serves, rather, as a caution to approach such definition carefully.

In 2000, Quijano and Ennis coined the term "coloniality of power" (20) as a conceptual critique of modernity's promise of progress. The decolonial perspective that developed from this allowed for "a specific epistemic, political and ethical instrument for transforming the world by transforming how people see it, feel it and act in it" (Tlostanova & Mignolo,2009, p. 21). Decolonial education, for these scholars, has two facets: instruction (knowledge used to navigate one's world or, in a narrow sense, the content taught); and nurturing (knowledge aimed at collective well-being in the world with a focus on an ethics of care that is collective and not individual) (Mignolo, 2001). What is clear in any engagement with the notion of decolonial education is that this stance towards education must challenge colonial epistemologies and ways of being in the world (Mbembe, 2001). In relation to decolonial pedagogy, the literature in South Africa is scarce.[2] For example, I could find only two articles (Koopman, 2018 and Kumalo, 2018) in the *Journal of Education* that referred to decolonial pedagogy (or teaching strategies). Koopman's (2018) work focused on how to marry indigenous knowledge with Western colonial science. This work provided a basis for thinking through what content should be taught in a decolonial pedagogy and went as far as indicating what this pedagogy could look like. Koopman's focus on Ubuntu underpinning pedagogy is useful for introducing an ethics of care, which is often absent, into pedagogy. Another of the useful points that Koopman made, however, relates to the need to embed learning and teaching in cultural understandings. How one accomplishes this is illustrated in an interesting article by McClure et al (2023). However, a brief caveat is needed here since science and indigenous ways of knowing are quite distinct, and it makes little sense to speak of Western colonial science because the epistemic base of science is certainly not entirely Western. What makes science scientific is the systematic approach to building knowledge

2 There are many courses offered in decolonial pedagogy such as those at City University of New York or Washington State University, for example. The focus on these courses is not on specific pedagogical mechanisms for decolonising pedagogy but is, rather, on achieving multi-voiced classrooms that focus on equal access to knowledge. The work of Postma (2019) strikes a similar note in its focus on decolonial pedagogy as equalising knowledge acquisition and construction, with attention being paid to the polarity of epistemologies and modes of being. My paper is a different kind of engagement with pedagogy; here I am concerned with what pedagogical mechanisms can transform colonial pedagogy.

through falsification and the testing of hypotheses, underpinned by a particular epistemology. Science has, over the past four centuries, been ridiculously successful, lending it an aura of power and esteem not afforded to other disciplines. So, science is indeed a success story. However, the gravitas afforded science has led many to think in terms of its being superior to other ways of knowing. Knowledge, however, is only that which makes it easier for one to deal with crises in one's context. Later in this paper, I argue that one needs both scientific knowledge as well as everyday, empirical knowledge to navigate schooling.

In another *Journal of Education* article that addresses decolonial teaching, Kumalo (2018) provided an interesting view of pedagogy as being based in dialectical as opposed to binary opposites. Kumalo argued that the #feesmustfall movement falls into the trap from which it is trying to emerge by positing that colonial and decolonial thinking are two separate binary opposites. This kind of dualist thinking, Kumalo indicated, gets us nowhere. I agree that decolonial thinking cannot be the opposite of colonial thinking and believe that they are dialectically entangled. I discuss this in the following section where I propose a way of looking at decolonial thinking based on deconstruction.

The contradiction in Western colonial pedagogy

For Vygotsky (1934/1986) it is in times of upheaval, chaos, and clashes that moments of change become visible in crises or contradictions that emerge. Crises enable us to see contradictions in a system that may have been vague or even unseen in the past. The critical moment opened by #feesmustfall cast a light on the silences in Western colonial pedagogy. It was in the moment of protest, then, that the crisis of colonialism in South Africa emerged as a contradiction between the accepted Western canon and a new way of being, thinking, and doing. The decolonial moment, although already in existence, was pushed to the forefront of debates in education in this moment of crisis that saw universities literally shut down by students who demanded that they be heard. Colonialism needed to be critiqued and this was the moment that presented itself.

I make a distinction here between Western colonialism and Soviet colonialism since these are two separate epistemological stances. While much, if not all, Western colonialism of the 20th century was premised on a dualist logic that separated, for example, mind and society (see, for example, the debates on nature vs. nurture in psychology in the 1970s), Soviet colonialism in the 20th century was predicated on a dialectical understanding that drew impetus from the work of Marx and, to a lesser extent, Hegelian dialectical thought. In my reading of decolonial thought, it is the Western, rather than the Soviet colonialism that appears to be the catalyst for the calls for decolonising education given the desire to move away from the Cartesian ego, that rational ideal, to a view of the individual as socially embedded and formed. In the former one sees a colonialism that focuses on the individual as rational and distinct from society while the latter position is the one taken by Soviet

colonialism[3] that views the individual as a product of the social, rather than vice versa. Of course, whether one talks of Soviet or Western colonialism, it is still colonialism, bringing with it the silencing of certain people whose voices become marginalised and, eventually, unheard. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will focus my discussion on Western colonialism, asking what contradictions have arisen in pedagogy in Western colonialism that are the foundation for the dynamic change for which students are asking. To do this, it is important to understand how one can critique colonial thinking in a manner that leads to dynamic change, rather than maintaining the status quo. To do this I turn to the work of deconstruction as a moment in overcoming binaries.

What do you see? Or: Deconstructing colonialism

Figure 1
Vase or faces? Face-ist or vase-ist?

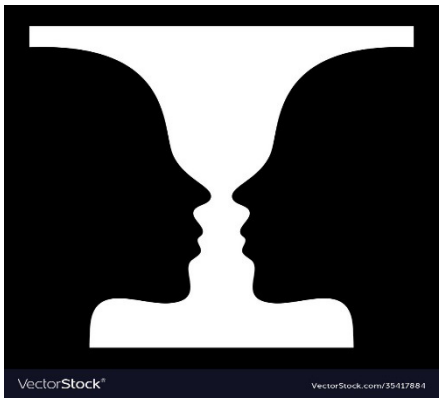

Figure 1 is a popular diagram often used in undergraduate psychology lectures to illustrate how one's perspective colours what one sees. Do you see a vase or do you see two faces? This figure, for me, captures what I feel is the basic mechanism for engaging critically with colonial education and pedagogy through a form of Derridian deconstruction. Now, for Derrida (1978, 2016), binaries do not hold and by focusing on the marginalised term (the vase, or the faces) one forces oneself to see the other, that which remained out of sight initially, but that is so clearly and obviously there when one decentres one's gaze. For Derrida, meaning is always deferred and different, never fixed in a final truth; in order to dis-assemble binary opposites, it is necessary to shift focus, to differ. It is in acknowledging the differences between them that one comes to see the entire picture as a whole. Here I disagree with Derrida in that certain knowledge(s) have epistemic weight that is guaranteed by being shared and located in a disciplinary home. This is not to say that meaning is indeterminately fixed for all time. Rather, the suggestion is that meaning can be fixed by being shared by members of a discipline in a socio-cultural time and place. This meaning may shift over time,

3 There is, I agree, some argument in the literature regarding whether Russia's invasion of the Baltic states in the 1940s constitutes an occupation or a colonisation (Annus, 2012). These terms, I note, are not synonymous, although they are sometimes used as such. For Annus, at least, a modern nation state cannot be colonised but only ever occupied because colonialism brings modernity with it and is, then, generally aimed at premodern societies. Annus makes a good point, but the fact that the Baltic states eventually merged to a greater or lesser degree with their occupiers suggests, to me, a colonial mindset that allows the gaze of the colonial master to be internalized by the population, something Annus also acknowledges. Colonialism functions for a longer period than an occupation would precisely because the colonised come to view the coloniser as being better.

but can be fixed at specific times. In the early 1970s the feminist movement's call for equal pay for equal work for women was radical and called for a decentring of the patriarchal view of men as primary and women as secondary. In the 21st century, however, the idea that women should not receive equal pay for equal work is archaic. The understanding of female competence has changed over the last few decades because feminsists have addressed the clear contradictions in the patriarchal system. If we think of decolonial thinking as addressing contradiction, we can see it as a call for a critique of colonialism from within; one identifies the contradictions within colonial thinking and decentres the fixed so-called truths. Of course, readers familiar with Marx and Engels's take on capitalism (identified as a colonial endeavour) will argue that it is the most dynamic of all systems and is able to maintain its central principle of profit over people by incorporating change, without changing the nature of capitalism. In the sense that capitalism is so dynamic, then, perhaps the decolonial turn points not to critiquing colonial thought and, consequently, capitalism, but rather signals another moment in the transformation of capitalism (Z. Davis, personal communication, February 5, 2024).

While a number of articles in the literature focus on decolonising the curriculum in education, there is a relative dearth of published work that deals with decolonising pedagogy. This is, I suggest, shortsighted since pedagogy and curriculum cannot be easily separated, except, perhaps, analytically. What is meant by pedagogy, however, needs to be established before one can talk about decolonising it.

Pedagogy: *Obuchenie*—teaching/learning

Various searches of databases result in a variety of different definitions of pedagogy. However, most definitions have in common the notion that pedagogy is the science or art of teaching. I locate this paper in the cultural historical theory of Vygotsky (1978, 1934/1986) and neo-Vygotskians such as Hedegaard (2020), and view pedagogy, therefore, as teaching *and* learning. Vygotsky uses the term *obuchenie* to refer to the practice of teaching/learning. This word is not translatable into English but may be understood as teaching/learning: two sides of one coin. Teaching and learning, then, are dialectically entailed. The notion of a teacher-centred lesson or a learner-centred lesson makes no sense if one understands pedagogy as being both teaching-centred *and* learning-centred. Teaching, which refers to providing access to novel knowledge, must necessarily be student focused and, similarly, learning, which requires a student to acquire novel knowledge, centres on the relation between teacher and taught.

In his General Genetic Law (1978) Vygotsky famously overcame Cartesian dualism by illustrating that mind is social. All higher cognitive functioning, what we may call executive functioning today, begins as a real relation between the more capable other and the novice. Through an active process of guidance called mediation, the more capable other guides the

novice into new ways of knowing, doing, and being.[4] This mediation takes place in social interaction in a zone that opens between teacher and taught that Vygotsky called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP) (1978; 1986). This zone is not a property of either party engaged in joint problem-solving, but is, rather, a unique social space that opens in the context of development. The ZPD then, cannot be seen as task specific, like scaffolding is (see Wood et al., 1976 for more on this interesting mechanism for teaching children to engage in tasks), but must be seen as developmental in its unfolding over time. Anyone who has ever taught knows that concepts are not necessarily acquired in one sitting, but, rather, need time to develop meaningfully. The kind of concepts that are mediated in school, for Vygotsky (1978), are scientific concepts, entirely abstract ones that need to be taught and that cannot be learnt through empirical engagement with the world in the absence of a teacher. Although Vygotsky called these concepts scientific, they should not be mistaken for concepts acquired only in science; in fact, many of the examples Vygotsky used to describe scientific concepts are drawn from the social sciences, rather than the natural or physical sciences. These concepts are abstract and have no connection to the real world outside of the meaning attributed to them by a community that shares a common understanding of the concept. The mechanism through which abstract, scientific concepts become meaningfully understood by the developing child is through their interpenetration with spontaneous, or everyday concepts.

Pedagogy: Transmission versus acquisition

We can think of pedagogy as falling between two poles: transmission pedagogy and acquisition pedagogy, each of which has a distinct ontological view of the child. Transmission-based pedagogy, based in a behaviourist understanding of the child as a blank slate, focuses on the expert teachers transmitting knowledge to the empty vessel that is the student. Acquisition pedagogy owes its theoretical foundation to the works of Piaget (1976) and Vygotsky's (1978) understanding that knowledge is constructed and that a child/student is an active cognising agent. In this view, students are seen as actively able to construct meaning through transacting with more knowledgeable others, such as teachers. My work in pedagogy locates me in the camp of acquisition pedagogy. In education, the focus on acquisition of concepts has been called a constructivist approach to education. In other words, a student actively constructs knowledge with assistance from a more expert other. The term "constructivism" has become extremely popular in education over the past 30 years, so much so that it has begun to lose its coherence and there are authors, such as Ardington and Spaull (2022) who have indicated that constructivism relies on children constructing their own, idiosyncratic concepts, in the absence of a very skilled expert other. In fact, according to Spaull (2022) constructivism does not rely on "direct and explicit" (p. 5) pedagogy. It is hard to imagine a child learning the abstract concepts of say, calculus, or photosynthesis without being taught them; nothing in the child's lived experience or empirical world can illustrate calculus or, say, the concept of democracy. These are abstractions whose meaning is fixed by members of a disciplinary group who mobilises them. In fact, the kind of concepts acquired

4 I think it is important to note here that a culturally more competent other, someone who knows more than the novice in a specific field, is not intended as an ideological argument for one person being in any way better than another. It is obvious, in teaching/learning, that one partner in the dyad must know more about the concept under investigation if any learning is to happen.

in school, I have noted, are abstract and must necessarily be taught because empirically gained (everyday) concepts are idiosyncratic and can lead to misunderstandings. For the purposes of this paper, then, the view of pedagogy I am discussing is based on the Vygotskian notion of *obuchenie* that sees teaching/learning as two sides of a single coin. I turn now to a discussion of what decolonial pedagogy could possibly look like, based on the above.

A decolonial pedagogy?

Pedagogy, for my purposes, is a praxis that unfolds between teacher and taught; a more expert teacher guides and inducts the novice student into established ways of knowing that have been fixed, albeit temporarily, in disciplinary knowledge. I distinguish between pedagogical form and content. Content refers to the facts taught in school or the concepts that need to be acquired (Hedegaard, 1998). The form of pedagogy refers to how the teacher enables students to acquire these concepts. An example from my data illustrates this distinction.

Extract 1: Plants make food

1. Teacher: Is there someone there who can tell us again how the plant makes its own food?
2. Is there anyone?
3. Yes.
4. Can you take a ruler and point to the poster when you are talking.
5. Learner 1: Plant gets energy from the sun.
6. Teacher: And then?
7. Learner 1: Plant, plant. . . Plant . . .
8. Teacher: And then what happens next?
9. Who can help him?
10. Thank you very much. Yes.
11. Learner 2: Plant gets energy from the sun and the leaf gets air from the place of carbon dioxide, and the leaf gets water and oxygen.
12. Teacher: Very good [claps].

What we can see in extract 1 is that form of pedagogy that Sinclair & Coulthard (1975) have called as IRE sequence, one of Initiate, Respond, and Evaluate, and it is characteristic of most classes I see in my research. The teacher asks a question (line 1), students respond (Lines 8 and 11), and the teacher evaluates the response (line 12). The distinciton between content and form that I illustrate here, though, is purely analytical. Pedagogical content and form function like a moebus strip—one entails the other. In what follows I focus predominantly on developing an argument about the form of decolonial pedagogy, but recognise that this can never be distinct from the content being taught.

My starting point on elaborating a decolonial pedagogy lies in the work of Vygotsky (1934/1986) who indicated that the student learns actively through mediation in the ZPD (as

discussed above) (see Hardman, 2021, 2023). This requires the structured guidance of a more competent other. Note, though, that this is not a facilitator; a competent expert is a teacher who is well versed in how to teach as well as in the meaning of the concepts that will be acquired. Guidance is structured through dialogical interactions, where the teacher defines and elaborates on the concepts and the student comes to understand the meaning of the concept because abstract concepts are understood through interpenetration, guided by the teacher, with the student's everyday concepts. Abstract concepts, that is, those concepts taught in school, cannot be obtained empirically. The very nature of abstraction is such that it cannot be seen, touched, smelt, or heard. Hence use of the senses does nothing to help a child understand, for example, what the word *democracy* means. Echoing Freire and Ramos's (1970) notion of dialogical pedagogy as relating to authentic problems that occur in the student's social context, the mediation of meaning requires that the content being taught is related to the student's everyday experiences. When learning about photosynthesis, for example, the student must be able to grow vegetables in a sustainable manner in their own context. When one speaks of ascending from the abstract to the concrete, what we have in mind here is the student's ability to apply the abstraction learnt across different contexts. For mediation to provide meaning to the content under discussion, the teacher must share their aims for teaching this content. "Why are we learning this and how will we use this in our lives?" are questions that the teacher uses to encourage dialogue in the ZPD. This requires not only that the teacher is conceptually embedded in the abstraction being taught, but also that they are able to reflect on their own understanding of the use of this knowledge. The question now, of course, is this: "What content is taught in schools?" Vygotsky (1934/1986) distinguished between two types of concepts—scientific and spontaneous (or everyday) concepts. As noted above, the content acquired in schools is abstract in nature or what he referred to as being scientific. While the spontaneous concept can be learnt empirically, the abstract scientific concept must be taught. Of course, since this is a Vygotskian conception of concepts, one cannot separate the abstract and everyday except analytically. Both concepts are required for meaning to develop and these concepts[5] are interdependent. Acquisition of the abstract concept requires a student's ability to apply this abstraction across different contexts.

Mediation within the ZPD allows for dialogical instruction where the meaning of concepts is constructed by the teacher and taught through the interconnectedness of everyday concepts. In the absence of the everyday, the abstract concept is hollow and meaningless; in the absence of the abstract concept, the everyday cannot come into the student's consciousness (Vygotsky, 1934/1986). It is in this way that the scientific concept is not unlike Freire & Ramos's (1970) notion of the word that is a characteristic of dialogue in teaching/learning. In praxis the word is animated beyond mere verbalism. In fact, "[t]here is no true word that is not at the same time praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world" (Freire & Ramos, 1970, p. 68). It is in dialogue that the child's voice, through inclusion of the previously marginalised voice, joins the school context and challenges the asymmetrical power of the colonial voice. This is not to suggest that children/students know more about the

5 See Blunden's (2012) work for an exposition of how scientific and spontaneous concepts are one concept with two different routes of development and, hence, separating these into two distinct concepts is not possible.

abstract concepts than the teacher does. On the contrary, it is the teacher who must facilitate the students' access to the abstract concept, but the meaning attached to the concept derives from the student's ability to connect and merge this with their everyday concepts. It is here, in this hypothetical space that the meaning of the concepts being acquired forms. Different historical, cultural, and social ideas are linked, delinked, and negotiated to develop the meaning of the concept. However, when I say that meaning is negotiated, I am not suggesting that it is relative or that meaning is deferred a la Derrida (1978). While no scientific knowledge is ever set in stone (the Higgs boson is an example of such a concept) there is a certain epistemic weight that is conferred by disciplines outside of the schooling system that fix concepts with meaning. This is always subject to change as new knowledge develops, but meaning is not eternally deferred. Changing the status quo, however, does not come easily. There is always the chance that someone will feel real epistemic violence when work they believe is central is shown to be peripheral or is critiqued in a decolonial space (Hardman, 2021). There is no simple way to dismantle centuries of colonial ways of thinking and being. However, change in the 21st century is a necessity for humanity to continue to thrive. That many of us experience change as threatening requires of us that we approach decolonial critiques of colonialism carefully.

In pedagogy, with which this paper is concerned, the major contradiction I have seen in the traditional colonial education system in South Africa lies in the object of education. On the one hand, teachers' pedagogy is motivated towards the development of student understanding of core concepts, but, on the other, teachers are required to cover an enormous amount of content in a content-heavy curriculum, over a short period of time (Hardman, 2015). The contradiction, then, is between curriculum coverage (which, arguably, does not lead to understanding) and the need to develop critical thinkers who can apply abstract concepts across contexts. I have seen teachers move away from developing understanding to simply trying to cover the curriculum. Learning suffers immensely when pace is tightened in lessons to secure the covering of content at the expense of developing understanding. Teaching to test is a colonial legacy that continues today in our schools since it is underpinned by factors such as English being the language of instruction from grade 4 (see McKinney, 2017) and a curriculum that focuses on specific ways of knowing that are supposedly scientific and that do not consider students' lived experiences (Lebeloane, 2017; Mahabeer, 2021). The colonial fixation with English instruction in a so-called scientific curriculum results in standardised testing that reflects the norms, values, and expectations of the dominant culture, without taking into account the lived experience of marginalised South Africans (Badroodien, 2015). Moreover, differences in training between wealthy students (generally white) and poor students in teacher training programmes, and the pervasive lack of material and human resources in poorer schools continue as the legacy not only of apartheid but also of colonialism. So homogenous[6] is the culture represented in our textbooks that a foreign teacher would have no problem teaching in a South African school in terms of following the curriculum. There are many contradictions we can focus on here but for me a significant one is that mentioned above between teaching for understanding versus teaching towards a test.

6 I encourage readers to engage with science textbooks in primary schools in South Africa to see how colonial thinking is woven silently throughout the curriculum.

There is a way of overcoming this contradiction through altering pedagogical practices in schools and focusing not on teaching and testing, but rather on teaching and developing understanding that applies across contexts. This pedagogical practice has been outlined in this paper as a decolonial pedagogy that focuses on the co-construction of meaning when one is teaching abstract concepts and the development of understanding through a dialogical mode of teaching.

Conclusion

In this paper, I seek to address a debate in education that has unfolded since 2015 regarding the calls for decolonial education. I have focused specifically on developing a notion of decolonial pedagogy, using the work of Vygotsky (1934/1986), Freire & Ramos (1970), and Hedegaard (2020) by explaining what form this praxis can take in a classroom, I have argued for a pedagogy that includes the voice of previously marginalised students in a dialogical developmental space in which a culturally more competent other (the teacher) guides the student towards the co-construction of meaning as a mechanism for decolonial pedagogy. Moving from a traditional transmission-based pedagogy to one that places more emphasis on acquisition is not an easy task. South Africa attempted something like this in the early days of democracy when Outcomes Based Education seemed to hold the promise of a pedagogy that could develop students cognitively. This endeavour failed, not least because it was not introduced in any fully structured manner. The primary reason for the previous failures of novel pedagogical models that focus on developing students cognitively is, I would argue, because pedagogy is political. One requires enormous political will to shift structures that have existed for centuries. Change can be felt as a violent assault on established ways of coming to know. Here violence does not relate to physical violence but rather, to epistemic violence as people feel their ways of knowing or coming to know are being threatened. Perhaps, then, what is required for a true critical engagement with the colonial canon and its pedagogical basis is a Kierkegaardian leap of faith. A first step, I would argue, in taking this leap, is to re-evaluate how teachers teach in our schools and to prioritise the kind of knowledge that students need to navigate the 21st century.

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