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# Decolonizing the school curriculum for equity and social justice in South Africa

## Abstract

*The starting point of decolonizing the curriculum is in the schools and classrooms that I regard as the formal education laboratories for equity and social justice in a just society. Unfortunately, many South African public schools' curricula are not yet decolonized and thus continue to perpetuate the preparation of learners for leading western lives in a continent that is not western by nature. The South African school curriculum does little to address decolonization for equity and social justice in the South African public schools.*

*This article argues for the decolonization of public school curricula for equity and social justice in South Africa. Background information is provided. Key terms will be decoded, followed by an outline of the frame of reference, method of research and a discussion of the process of decolonising the curriculum. The importance of decolonizing the school curriculum for equity and social justice in South Africa will be discussed. Threats emanating from not decolonizing the curriculum for equity and social justice in South Africa will also be discussed. Conclusions will be drawn.*

**Key terms:** Decolonizing; the school curriculum; equity and social justice; South Africa

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, I argue for the decolonization of the school curriculum for equity and social justice in South Africa. Background information is provided. Key terms are decoded, followed by an outline of the frame of reference, the method of research and a discussion of the process of decolonizing the curriculum. Threats emanating from not decolonizing the curriculum for equity and social justice in South Africa are also discussed and conclusions are drawn.

### 1.1 Background information

South Africa, like most African countries, was colonized from the time Whites arrived, explored and settled in the country. The Whites' process of colonization took various forms which included, among others, class, gender, inequality, language and race. In endorsing this assertion, Mignolo (2011) states that racism, sexism, ecocide, ethnocide and genocide add to the various forms of colonization. These do not totally describe colonialism of western society (Ibid 2011). In endorsing the preceding assertion, Dr Kofi Busia openly admitted that:

"At the end of my first year at secondary school (Mfantsipin, Cape Coast, Ghana), I went home to Wechi for the Christmas vacation. I had not been home for four years, and on that visit, I became painfully aware of my isolation. I understood our community far less than the boys of my own age who had never been to school. Over the years, as I went through college and university, I felt increasingly that the education I received taught me more and more about Europe and less and less about my own society".

It is apparent from what Dr Kofi said that he was colonized and ended up a misfit in his own community. Although he may have been in a position to communicate in the same language with his people and peers, he lagged behind the boys of his age in terms of the education they acquired in their community while he was away. That made him feel

isolated in his community because he now belonged to a different class and status.

Although colonizers did not introduce education in Africa (Rodney 2009), they introduced some new sets, some of which either replaced and or supplemented those which had been there before. That stimulated new norms and values and practices (Ibid. 2009). Colonizers naturalized these various forms of colonization as norms and values and then later as part of the statutes. The establishment of western forms of formal schools, which superseded the indigenous and or traditional schools, further exacerbated the process by naturalizing and promoting coloniality and or colonialism in the minds of all learners who attended those schools. The latter thus served as laboratories in which social injustices such as class, gender, language and racial inequality were inculcated, tested, implemented and perpetuated.

Objection to colonization started in many African countries' governments and their education systems shortly after they acquired independence from colonialism. One of the aims of decolonial thinking and decolonization is to re-instate, re-inscribe and embody the dignity, equity and social justice in people whose norms and values as well as their nature, their reasoning, sensing and views of life were 'violently devalued or demonized by colonial, imperial and interventionist agendas as well as by postmodern and alter- modern internal critiques. For example, some leaders and senior academics of African universities argued, in the early 1970s, that Africa needed African schools and universities that were decolonized and support its development (Yesufu, 1973). Other protagonists of African Renaissance in education which covers decolonization and Africanization of the curriculum include Odora-Hoppers (2001), Odora-Hoppers (2002), Mawewi (2012) and Zenawi (2012) respectively. They concur that it is a norm to measure the educational achievement and success of African learners on Western European capitalist culture which elevated the English language over and above other languages. In endorsing on the objection to colonization, Le Grange (2017) asserted that decolonization was a necessary response to the "first and second generation colonialism, neo-colonialism and the recent (re)ascendency of neoliberalism". He draws from Odora-Hoppers and Richards (2011) who assert that the colonized were captured and their physical assets taken away from them during the first-generation colonialism. Their minds were colonized during the second-generation colonialism through economics, education, law and science. Le Grange (2017) further says the first and second generation of colonialism led to denigration and decimation of indigenous knowledge. Colonialism led to the colonized losing their epistemology and ontology and adopting those of the colonizers. They lost their expertise to create and interpret knowledge. Everything was built around White supremacy. For example, Britain came to be known as Great Britain with assertions such as 'the sun never sets on the British Empire' which encapsulated the national pride in British supremacy.

More objections hereto were expressed by African leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana who coined the term neo-colonialism. To him, neo-colonialism related to providing a country with political independence while it remained under the radar of the colonial master which in most cases was a superpower. The latter decided and provided its development through, for example, class, education, funding, gender, race, etc. The 2015 South African higher education initiated hashtag '#RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall' movements which include Africanization of institutions of higher learning and decolonization of the curriculum are a continuation of the post-independence plights of many African countries such as Ghana and Nigeria (Moja, Luescher & Schreiber 2015).

The starting point of decolonizing a country is through decolonizing the school curriculum that I regard as the formal education laboratories for equity and social justice in a just society. Unfortunately, many South African public schools' curricula do not seem to be decolonized. They seem to continue perpetuating the preparation of learners for leading western lives in a continent that is not western by nature. The South African schools policies do little or nothing to address decolonization for equity and social justice in the South

African public schools. (The Constitution of South Africa and the South African Schools Act of South Africa ([www.gov.za](http://www.gov.za).) That can further be noted with the introduction of Outcomes Based Education (OBE), National Curriculum Statements (NCS), Revised National Curriculum Statements (RNCS) and CAPS which respectively did almost nothing to address the matter of decolonization. Lastly, it is of no use to Africanize institutions of higher learning and decolonize their curriculum when nothing is done at primary school level. It is for that reason that this article aims and argues for the decolonization of the school curriculum. That constitutes the problem statement of this article. The following key terms, namely, colonization, decoloniality, decolonization, equity, social justice, schools as well as school curriculum, are defined for the purpose of this article.

Contrary to coloniality which Mignolo (2011:2) regards as the basis of western civilization whose historical ideology, namely, colonialism and 'foundational interconnectedness is often downplayed', is decoloniality. Decoloniality arose during the sixteenth century at the same time as colonialism in the USA. However, there does not seem to be an agreed upon definition or description thereto. Decoloniality is instead, defined and or described differently by many scholars (Quijano 2000; Quijano 2007; Mignolo 2011; Vallega 2015). For example, Mignolo (2011), whose definition is accepted as the working definition in this article, maintains that it is synonymous with decolonial "thinking and doing" and thus defines it as an analytical and practical process that questions European power and whose aim is to confront and delink the mind from coloniality which is also referred to as "the colonial matrix of power". Vallega (2015) refers to it as some kind of "thinking in radical exteriority". That means it is a way of thinking critically by analysing and critiquing socio-economic as well as political practices of Western civilization and thus draw conclusions from both sides of the coin by opposing the pillars thereto.

Although the term equity is defined differently by various scholars (Gustein, Middleton, Fey, Larson, Heid, Dougherty, Tunis 2005; Bobo, Yesuf, Woldie 2017; Harris-Fry, Shrestha, Costello & Saville 2017), they respectively concur that it refers to the principle of fairness. For example, Gustein et al. (2005) argue that equity is a process of rectifying the economic and social inequalities and injustices that may be existing in a society. In this article, equity is defined as a process that ensures appropriate and reasonable equal access and achievement of all learners to learning irrespective of their class, culture, gender and race among others.

Social justice refers to a situation in which all societal members live peacefully and share all available amenities equally (Moja, Luescher & Schreiber 2015). It means individuals have equal rights to something they earned in a society that practices social justice. Social justice is defined, in this article, as a state of affair in which societal members of different ages, classes, cultures, disabilities, gender, income, languages, race or religion share social goods and services equally.

A school is an institution of learning that starts from Grade R to Grade twelve and offers programmes that are lower than those offered in a College and/or universities. It is defined, in this article, as in the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996) that a "school" means a public school or an independent school, which enrolls learners in one or more grades from Grade R (Reception) to Grade twelve.

School curriculum is defined differently (Grumet 1981; Aoki 1991; Pinar 2011). Grumet (1981) defines the school curriculum as what and the extent (past, present and future) to which teachers want their students to learn the arranged subject content taught in a school. Aoki (1991) asserts that much as the curriculum should be planned and taught, it should also be taught as lived (curriculum-as-lived) to enable students to critique and decolonize it if need be. It is important to note that the school curriculum could take various forms, namely, explicit, hidden or null (Le Grange, 2017). The explicit curriculum refers to a framework of a particular planned and packaged explicit learning content. It exposes

learners to past, present and possible future situations. Explicit curriculum promotes critical thinking by providing learners with the tools to critique learning content and decolonize the curriculum if need be. Some of the sources which are used in the explicit curriculum include assessments guidelines, presentations by experts, prescribed textbooks and readers, etc. Hidden curriculum refers to the one in which students are taught and at the same time indoctrinated about the dominant culture and values of, for example, the colonizer. The null curriculum refers to whatever content knowledge is excluded in a curriculum. These help schools to ask the questions what, when, who, how and why as they decolonize the curriculum.

Much as the curriculum could be explicit, hidden or null, it is defined in this article as a set of presented thoughts that include what and the extent (past, present and future) to which teachers want their students to be exposed to with the aim of drawing from critical social theory to emancipate and decolonize it if need be. Following the decoding of key terms, is an outline of the frame of reference of this article.

## **1.2 Frame of reference**

There is no universally accepted definition of the concept frame of reference. Lippmann (1922), Tversky and Kahneman (1981) defined it differently. For example, Lippman (1922), in discussing their understanding on the frame of reference asserts that as people, we get to read or be told about things before we see them and that we preconceive and imagine them before they are seen. Education facilitates that they be understood better by unpacking them in their context. Education enables us to mark objects as familiar or strange and emphasizes the difference between them. Tversky and Kahneman (1981) define a frame of reference as “the context, viewpoint, or set of presuppositions or of evaluative criteria within which a person’s perception and thinking seem always to occur, and which constrains selectively the course and outcome of these activities”. It is defined, in this article as a set of assumptions, attitudes, historical belief systems, culture, values and wishful thoughts we use to craft perceptions, give meaning and make judgements to phenomena. Critical social theory is identified as the frame of reference for this article. It is further unpacked hereunder to facilitate understanding of its origin and relevance for this article.

Max Horkheimer, a Frankfurt theorist who drew on the critical methods of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, described theory as critical insofar as it seeks “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them.” As critical theorists, they regard these as the primary obstacle to human liberation. That is, one’s ideology (belief system) dominates influences and makes it difficult for one to emancipate from it and adopt different assumptions, attitudes, belief systems such as culture and religion. Critical theory which occurs in a social setting is focused at reflecting, reviewing and radically changing the thinking of the society as a whole through an emancipatory form of Marxian theory. Critical social theory is defined, in this article, as a form of self-reflective knowledge which involves understanding and theoretical explanation which aims to reduce and eliminate the entrapment syndrome of being dominated or dependent to total independence and liberation of the mind (belief system).

The core concepts thereof are that:

1. A society should do a self-reflection by reviewing its history, that is, what it is, where it is, where it comes from, how it came to be where it is, who made it possible, why and how did it happen and emancipate towards independence - a better understanding and theoretical explanation of phenomenon which aims to reduce and eliminate the entrapment syndrome of being dominated or dependence.
2. Critical social theory should help societal members to improve their understanding of themselves by refraining from compartmentalizing but instead integrating all phenomenon such as the major social sciences, including geography, economics,

sociology, history, political science, anthropology, and psychology for the purpose of improving the situation.

The preceding concepts highlight the need to decolonize the school curriculum for equity and social justice in South Africa. Decolonizing the school curriculum for equity and social justice in South Africa will serve as an emancipatory radical paradigm shift (change) in which all relevant factors which could lead to improvement thereof will be integrated.

This article is conceptual and based on literature which was analysed and interpreted to give meaning (Henry, Foss and Ahl 2015). That is, data was not collected from respondents being it quantitatively or qualitatively. Hereunder follows a discussion of the process to decolonize the school curriculum for equity and social justice in South Africa.

## **2. The process of decolonizing the curriculum**

There are different ways through which the curriculum can be decolonized for equity and social justice in South African schools. The process of decolonizing the curriculum can be facilitated by drawing from the work of Smith (1999) who identified the following elements of decolonization, namely, deconstruction and reconstruction, self-determination and social justice, ethics, language, internationalization of indigenous experiences, history and critique.

Deconstruction and reconstruction, in the context of this article, concerns reviewing and improving distorted school curriculum by rewriting it correctly to suit the people for whom it is meant. That includes deconstructing colonial and in some cases distorted school curriculum and correcting it by reconstructing it. For example, it will be important to teach African learners, during a geography lesson, about geographical features and refer to examples they can relate to in the African continent than those in other continents such as Europe. That means it will be important to teach them about the Atlas Mountains in Morocco, West Africa and Zambezi River in Zambia, Southern Africa which they can relate to by virtue of both of them being in Africa instead of teaching them about the Alps mountains and Rhine river in Europe (Rodney, 2009).

As part of decolonizing the curriculum for equity and social justice, it is important to deconstruct distorted information and reconstruct it so that there is a balance of information to the benefit of learners. For example, it is important to spell out during a history lesson about who owned the land on which diamond and gold were discovered and what happened to those people let alone their shares of the profit made from the minerals (own view).

Self-determination and social justice relate to the school curriculum decolonized by ensuring the legitimacy of content knowledge embedded in and resembles its self-determined experiences, histories and ways of viewing reality. For example, in South African history, 'negative labelling, deficit theorizing, genetically deficient or culturally deficient models that pathologized the colonised ... and retelling the stories of the past and envisioning the future' as noted by Chilisa (2012). That is, decolonizing the school curriculum for equity and social justice aims at enabling Africans to determine their destiny by emancipating from the inferiority and negativity which they are portrayed with in various forms such as being culturally, genetically and naturally inferior to Western White Europeans.

Ethics, in this article, concerns the formulation and implementation of what is acceptable in terms of the norms and values within agreed upon legislation to the protection of indigenous knowledge systems in the school curriculum. Rodney (2009) maintains that the colonial school system and its curriculum were crafted with the ethics of preparing Africans to remain subservient and assist Europeans to dominate and exploit the continent Africa through their private capitalist firms. He (Ibid, 2009) further says it was not a school system whose curriculum was crafted in Africa by Africans and 'designed to promote the

most rational use of material and social resources' and give the youth confidence and pride as Africans. Instead, it inculcated a sense of deference towards European capitalism. That means a decolonized curriculum could be crafted in Africa and by Africans whose ethics promote confidence and pride in the African youth and also inculcate the culture of rational use of material and social resources for equity and social justice.

Language concerns the importance of developing indigenous languages further and using them as official languages to communication and teaching and learning the school curriculum. Afrikaans and or English have, for a long time been used the medium of instruction for teaching in many schools including institutions of higher learning in South Africa. As part of decolonizing the curriculum although in an institution of higher learning, IsiZulu, one of the eleven official South African languages, was introduced as one of the languages of communication and instruction for the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal students is a breakthrough in the South African education system ([www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)).

Internationalization of indigenous experiences relates to schools drawing from other former colonized schools at international level and using their relevant and useful ideas to compare and contrast them. Once that has been done, craft and implement a decolonized school curriculum.

One of the most popular ways is to emancipate from what many regard as the arrogant Western individualism of "I" to "We" (Le Grange 2017). That is, decolonizing the school curriculum has to be crafted around Ubuntu/ Botho (I am because we are) philosophy of the people, by the people and for the people. The content knowledge, assessment, etc. should be crafted by people with expertise in consultation with relevant stakeholders whose knowledge contribute towards the culture, norms and values thereof.

Decolonizing the history curriculum in this context includes topics in which the written or unwritten objective past that is unearthed research is taught to learners in schools (Rodney, 2009). That is, history which includes the culture and language of the colonised people is synergized with the present and thereby facilitates better understanding and emancipating towards providing a decolonized school curriculum.

Critique, in this context, refers to decolonizing a school curriculum model that continues to perpetuate colonial ideology and deny the direct and indirect consumers thereof space think as individuals, express their views and concerns from their own frames of reference. Decolonization of the school curriculum is targeting at what Ngugi wa Thiongo (2009; 2016) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni in Prof Msila (2017) respectively seem to concur to as the epistemicides (the process of killing and appropriation of others' knowledge which goes hand in glove with linguicides, that is, the killing of languages of the colonised) committed by colonialism. Ngugi wa Thiongo further unpacks epistemicides and their methodology well by providing the following example that "Get a few natives, empty their hard disk of previous memory, and download into them a software of European memory". That is, colonial school curriculum acculturates and brainwashes the mind by killing in an individual their indigenous knowledge and language then replace it with the colonial thinking and language.

The application of social critical theory during teaching of the subject content is one of the ways through which the school curriculum could be decolonized. Dei (2000) endorses that by indicating that it is important to challenge imperial ideologies and colonial relations of production because they shape the academic practices. Dei's argument justifies the need to unpack and challenge British Colonial Office that was part of the British government which was mining copper in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) but would not build schools for the indigenous Zambians because there was not enough money for that (Rodney, 2009). That was despite them mining copper and generating a lot of revenue for themselves in the land of the Zambians.

Guattari (2001) argues that new ways of living cannot be created by reverting to old ways of doing things. Equally, decolonization cannot be achieved by old formulas but in responding to developments that aim at better quality of livelihoods. That means decolonization of the school curriculum can be achieved by ensuring that it is in line with the global developments that aim at improving the quality of livelihoods.

Other ways through which the school curriculum can be decolonized were borrowed from institutions and views expressed during the #Fees must fall events in South Africa. Shay (2015) expressed a view, during discussions on decolonization of the curriculum at the University of Cape Town, that there is a need to address ways in which colonialism is covertly and overtly imposed and spread in all aspects of the curriculum. It is important to ensure that learners and students are not exposed to covert colonial school curriculum. That includes their targeting of the choice of content knowledge, construction of sentences or statements, choices of images, metaphors, readings; and at much deeper levels, the very 'ways of knowing'. The Department of Basic Education officials can use this strategy to decolonize the school curriculum. One of the starting points could be to review the status of history of the currently offered school curriculum in South African schools. It could be done by focusing on where it is, where it comes from, how it came to be where it is, who made it possible, why and how did it happen and emancipate towards independence - a better understanding and theoretical explanation which aims to reduce and eliminate the entrapment syndrome of being dominated or dependence on colonial education.

During the '#Rhodes must fall' discussions on decolonization, Ian Scott (2015) argued that the higher education system '[is] failing the majority of the students' by refusing to acknowledge there is still no equalities in the education sector. Some universities advised students, who are taught in another language than their home languages, to attend academic developments programs where they train them, for example, on academic writing, sentence construction and presentation of facts in a 'academically acceptable' coherent and concise way. That made some of the students feel stigmatised in some higher education institutions. The argument pronounced was that articulation gap between schooling and higher education is one of the reasons why the extra classes were offered. That, in itself, is a result of the legacy of apartheid.

This article argues that decolonizing the school curriculum by ensuring that there is equity and social justice in schools can avert and save learners the embarrassment of having to attend academic development programs and stigmatisation by teaching them to write more coherent and concise in another language than their home language in the primary schools. Teaching them in their home languages is another option especially for those learners who will register in institutions of higher learning, which teach in those home languages such as Setswana, SeSotho and IsiZulu, some of the official African languages which constitute part of the eleven South African official.

Many South African universities offer indigenous African languages as optional subjects to students. Most students who enrol for those subjects are Coloureds, Indians and Whites who are studying, for example, medicine. The introduction of a mandatory African language of the region and or province in the school curriculum across the board can also facilitate decolonization for purposes of equity and social justice. It can further broaden all school learners' perspectives and strengthen their future employability in South Africa. Reforming the structure of the curriculum can also add towards decolonizing the school curriculum.

### **3. The importance of decolonizing the school curriculum**

Decolonizing the school curriculum is important in that it will address and demystify the ideologies of class, gender, ethnicity, ethnocide, inequality and race that dominate colonialism to young students in schools. The western view of interpreting and implementing

economics, education, law and science will be addressed by interpreting and implemented from an African perspective.

Botho/Ubuntu will be retained and sustained. That includes the retention and advancement of culture, dignity and language. The people will not lose their being which includes their norms and values.

#### 4. Threats of not decolonizing the school curriculum

One of the primary threats of not decolonizing the curriculum is acculturation and the total loss of the students' 'being'. That is, students can lose their being, which includes their culture, identity, native languages as well as norms and values. Students will forever remain subservient of the colonialist.

#### 5. Conclusions

I argued for the decolonization of public school curriculum for equity and social justice in South Africa in this article. Background information was provided. Key terms were decoded a frame of reference was outlined and the method of research was presented. I discussed on how the school curriculum could be decolonized. The importance of decolonizing the school curriculum for equity and social justice in South Africa was discussed. Threats of not decolonizing the curriculum for equity and social justice in South Africa were discussed. It is important to note that the suggestions provided in the preceding sections could still be added onto in facilitating the process of decolonizing school curriculum for equity and social justice in South Africa.

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#### LEGISLATION

Regulations pertaining to the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12, published as *Government Notice 1114* in *Government Gazette No. 36041* of 28 December 2012 as amended as-

*Government Notice 564* in *Government Gazette, No. 37840* dated 18 July 2014; *Government Notice 235* in *Government Gazette, No. 38589* dated 20 March 2015; and *Government Notices 1162* in *Government Gazette, No. 39435* dated 20 November 2015. *Government Notices No. 1495* in *Government Gazette, No. 40472* dated 2 December 2016.

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