Hidden traumas of coloniality of a South African child who received an academic scholarship

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Background: Cultural dissonance and exclusion in schools persevere because of a lack of response to diversity. In South Africa, coloniality manifests itself in teaching and learning practices through promoting and privileging selective cultural norms in schools, often to the detriment of poor black children.

Aim: Despite the availability of educational scholarships for poor children as a way to promote economic success, these opportunities are often laden with cultural and hegemonic expectations making them challenging to navigate, often rendering the experiences as traumatic rather than developmental.

Setting: The article reflects on children's schooling experiences in South Africa.

Methods: This qualitative exposition presents insights from a primary school teacher about her own childhood experiences of exclusion, alienation, and cultural dissonance in South African schools.

Results: It reveals the pervasiveness of coloniality and how social justice has still not fully permeated schools. The interplay between race and class remains salient.

Conclusion: Schools should intensify efforts to promote inclusion by recognising diversity and avoiding normalising singular narratives in diverse contexts. Educational opportunities given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds should be accompanied by psycho-social support to ease the culture shock and alienation they feel when learning in new contexts that differ from their norm.

Contribution: The article demonstrates that culture is more powerful than politics because, despite the democratic political context, the 'cultural bomb' of decoloniality is all-encompassing.

Keywords: academic scholarships; cultural dissonance; coloniality; school children; exclusion; social justice; post-colonial; schooling.

Introduction

Formal education and training are linked to improved 'life chances' which makes their link to social class highly inextricable (Weber 1947). As such, parents of lower-class children can fixate on (educational) opportunities that will allow their children to have lucrative futures. Ohikuare (2013) laments that:

> [*M*]any parents of colour send their children to exclusive, predominantly white schools in an attempt to give their kids a 'ticket to upward mobility' … but these well-resourced institutions can fall short at nurturing minority students emotionally and intellectually. (p. 1)

A public broadcasting service (PBS) documentary entitled *American Promise*, which was released in 2013, follows a young black child on his education journey from junior to high school over a period of 13 years during which he attended an elite, predominantly white school. It provides an eye-opening account of the emotional turmoil that accompanies the chance of upward mobility. The film highlights how gaining access to these types of institutions does not necessarily guarantee success as these children must grapple with so many hidden challenges. Furthermore, the documentary highlights that the parents of these minority children cannot provide the emotional support that they need because they themselves hail from different cultural and economic backgrounds, meaning that these children often feel isolated and misunderstood.

The post-1994 democratically elected South African government, through its policies that focus on transformation, inclusion, recognition and redress, demands that schools become integrated and that it is unconstitutional for schools to deny entry to learners based on their race. The first education policy, White Paper 1 (Department of Education [DoE] 1995), set the tone for subsequent education policies in the country and observed:

> It should be a goal of education and training policy to enable a democratic, free, equal, just and peaceful society to take root and prosper in our land, on the basis that all South Africans without exception share the same inalienable rights, equal citizenship, and common national destiny, and that all forms of bias [*especially racial, ethnic and gender*] are dehumanising. (p. 22)

As such, all schools, including previously white-only schools, are required to comply with instituting inclusive policies and practices. The opening of whites-only schools to non-white learners was historical and made international headlines. An article published in the *Los Angeles Times* depicted a story about a young black boy on his first day at an integrated school who declared 'I am feeling proud ...' but he also observed that he 'won't have anyone to talk to today' (Kraft 1991:para. 3–4). Who would have thought that almost 30 years after ushering in this new democracy in South Africa, the experiences of Mosohle, the young man who mentioned he would have no one to talk to, would still be felt by learners who have taken up the same journey and are awarded the same opportunity? This article reports on the experiences of a primary school teacher's personal childhood challenges after receiving both a high school academic scholarship as well as an educational opportunity that targeted poor black children. Academic scholarship means when school learners or university students have their studies paid for by an institution or an organisation (Collins Dictionary 2023). This is often awarded to children with high academic prowess or who meet specific demographic requirements. Her story highlights that, despite the multiple (educational) opportunities provided to previously disadvantaged persons through scholarships, these opportunities are often laden with cultural and hegemonic expectations that make them challenging to navigate, often rendering the experience as traumatic rather than developmental.

This article demonstrates that culture is more powerful than politics because despite the democratic political context, the 'cultural bomb' of decoloniality is all-encompassing (wa Thiong'o 1981). Similarly, Maldonado-Torres (2007:243) observes that despite the democratic elements that are indicative of modern society, 'we breathe coloniality, all the time and every day'.

This article is divided into six sections. After the introduction, the background discusses the effects of education on future earning potential, class as well as its ability to overcome oppressive regimes. The brief literature review discusses two distinct but interrelated issues. Firstly, it discusses coloniality as the prevailing culture in postmodern, postcolonial settings and secondly, it discusses the way in which coloniality manifests itself by making reference to empirical studies relating to children's schooling experiences in South Africa, including the struggles of integration by poor, often black, scholarship recipients. The conceptual framing section draws on the work of Bell (2016) who focusses on the importance of realising social justice. It also draws on the work of De Sousa Santos (2007), who critiques the hegemony that exists within the scientific knowledge production domain and argues for the recognition of other knowledges to promote *pluriversalism* (see Mignolo 2000). As such, the article is situated within a social justice and decolonial framework. The last two sections, entitled Findings and Conclusion, presents and discusses the findings; summarises the article and suggests ways in which some of the challenges presented by the findings can be mitigated.

Background: Salvation in education

Human Capital Theory (HCT) suggests that a knowledge-based economy is critical for the social and economic development of a state. Experience and knowledge are assigned a monetary value. Higher levels of skills, education and expertise would result in higher income potential for the individual and the state. First coined by Adam Smith (1776) and later refined by Theodore Schultz (1961) and Chiswick (2003), HCT also argues that 'investments in education increase future productivity', thus cementing the argument for good, quality basic education (Patrinos & Psacharopoulos 2018:2). Although HCT has been critiqued for its simplistic ideas and its limited understanding of how class impacts the labour market (Bowles & Gintis 1975), the key element of HCT that is relevant here is the relationship between skilled individuals and earning potential. Skilled individuals are more likely to find employment than those who are unskilled and their earning potential will also be higher.

The link between future earnings and class has also been noticed by Bourdieu (1977) who explains that the fundamental link between education and an individual's social class is their access to resources including social, cultural, and economic capital. In modern contexts, middle-class families reproduce their profitable place in society by using their economic capital to invest in educational advantages (Ball 2005). The same cannot be said for working-class families, who are often victims of generational poverty.

In highly unequal contexts, such as South Africa, the political decorum encourages philanthropic ventures, including public-private partnerships that invest in the education of the poor, because it is seen as levelling the plain fields. Mendelberg et al. (2021:808) believe that 'expanding educational opportunities for low-income people could thus be an effective means of addressing the problem of unequal representation' and inequality. This transformational ability of education has also been noticed by Freire (1970) who argues that education is a tool by which individuals can challenge and overcome oppressive regimes. As such, education is seen as a tool for individual and societal

transformation and empowerment, militating against poverty, ignorance, and oppression. It also guarantees future income potential, making it a must-have especially for poor families who work hard to break generational poverty. A study conducted by the World Bank that surveyed 79 countries, showed that, in 77 of the countries, parents made payments for basic education to ensure that their children receive a good education (Hillman & Jenkner 2004). The study found that, in some instances where parents could not afford cash payments, they would pay in kind such as 'providing food for the teachers, assisting in the classroom, or contributing their labour for school construction or maintenance' (Hillman & Jenkner 2004:4). Thus, when opportunities arise for children from working-class families to access good, quality education, parents jump at the opportunity considering the economic vantage point rather than the cultural and emotional implications.

Literature review

This brief review discusses two issues relating to poor, black children's experiences of schooling in South Africa. Firstly, it discusses and defines coloniality to illuminate the cultural context in which schools in post-apartheid South Africa are situated. Particular reference is made to common mechanisms of coloniality in schools, including coloniality as assimilation, coloniality as inclusion, and coloniality as power. Secondly, it discusses empirical studies that highlight the ways in which coloniality manifests itself in schools, with some reference to the literature of academic scholarship recipients' experiences of integrating into predominantly white schools.

Coloniality

Although not the first to do so, in their recently published book, McKinney and Christie (2021) make the useful conceptual distinction between colonialism and coloniality, the former being a 'political and economic relationship in which the sovereignty of a nation or people rests on the power of another nation' and the latter being the 'long standing patterns of power that emerge as a result of colonialism … that define culture labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production …' (McKinney & Christie 2021:xiii). wa Thiong'o (1981) describes this persistent cultural dominance and coloniality as a weapon yielded by imperialism to maintain the status quo and to perpetuate the idea that sophistication, development, heritage, knowledge, language, and morality emerged with the onset of colonialism. It characterises the precolonial era as a 'wasteland of non-achievement', humiliating subjects to the point where they would want to 'distance themselves from that wasteland' (wa Thiong'o 1981:3).

The alienation, tension and disruption brought about by intercultural differences are often experienced by children who occupy spaces that were previously off limits because of the policy of separate development during apartheid. The repealing of apartheid spatial planning and separate

development laws has led to widespread integration in schools. This integration gave rise to what Anzaldúa (1987) refers to as *borderlands*, which refers to a space where:

> [T]wo or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, upper and middle class touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (p. 19)

While this borderland should be a transformative space in many instances, it still becomes a place of conflict, exclusion, ostracisation, misrecognition, and subjugation. The experience of this violence is captured by Anzaldúa (1987:25) who describes this borderland space as a place where 'the Third World grates against the first and bleeds'. This also eloquently captures the experiences of the respondent on which this article is based.

Coloniality as assimilation

The challenge of learners not 'fitting in' their school contexts has been well documented in the literature and in popular media (Chapman 2014; Desmond-Harris 2017; Gqibitole 2019; Veriava 2021). Here, a conceptual distinction is made between integration and assimilation. Integration refers to an interest in adoption of both cultures (one's own and the context into one is placed) and assimilation results from the willingness to identify with one group while relinquishing the first culture (Berry 1990). Assimilation, a mechanism of coloniality, is highly problematic and contentious because it assumes that one must change or adapt to conform to the dominant prevailing culture. Embedded within this process is the assumption that some cultures or ways of being are superior or more acceptable than others. In the context of privileged schools in South Africa, which are predominately white, if non-white learners are required to assimilate into the existing school culture, it assumes that excellence can only be found in white spaces and that non-white persons and cultures have nothing to contribute to this excellence. While minority or non-white learners in these contexts often try to assimilate to be accepted (see Mohamed 2017), it perpetuates the idea that Western liberalism and whiteness are the standard of excellence. Assimilation is foundational to the colonial project.

Viswanathan (1988) observes colonisers have realised that colonising the mind is more effective than colonising the body and by so doing, colonial education became a key mechanism for perpetuating the objectives of colonialism. Althusser (1971) speaks about schools as ideological apparatuses of the state where these institutions can subvert the subaltern. The implications of this are damaging to indigenous language, culture and heritage as wa Thiong'o (1981) astutely notes that:

> [C]olonialism detonated a 'cultural bomb' that almost annihilated people's belief in their language, heritage and environment and made them regard their own cultural background as a wasteland of non-achievement that had to be left behind as quickly as possible. (p. 3)

As such, colonial education can result in cultural disassociation, where learners feel their culture, language,

and heritage inferior, negatively impacting their self-esteem and self-confidence. Educational spaces should recognise the hybridity, complexity, and richness of identity in post-colonial settings by discouraging cultural assimilation and celebrating multiple histories and ways of being.

Coloniality as inclusion (inclusive education)

Inclusion, inclusivity, and inclusive education are central to neo-liberal education policies globally. This has also been highlighted as fundamental to realising Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which argues for the realisation of quality education. However, the term has been used to group everything that is different from the dominant cultural norms, undermining the vastness and specificity of the *other*. Maldonado-Torres (2021) observes that:

> [C]alls for diversity open a net so broad that they do away with the specificity of the problem of systemic racism, antiblackness, coloniality, and related issues… [*and that even*] …. the grammar of diversity and inclusion fails to capture the specificity of systemic racism …. (p. 2)

Similarly, Walton (2018) suggests that inclusive education has been critiqued as being neo-colonial and is an unwelcomed imposition on colonised spaces, particularly in the South. This is mainly because the discourse on inclusive education has been framed and is situated within Northern knowledge systems and in this way perpetuates colonial hierarchies (Walton 2018). As such the reductionism and ideological ambiguity that is embedded within theories and practices of inclusive education confounds the outcomes, with the perhaps unintended consequence of perpetuating coloniality.

Coloniality as power

Said (1978) and Foucault (1991) both suggest that power is diffused in nature and academic institutions, including schools and can create as well as reinforce power dynamics. As such, it is important to critique prevailing systems of power and how they position the powerless. Freire (1970) was particularly concerned about the kind of society that would emerge if the diversity of thought, practice, and being was not centred in education. Giroux (1992) uses the term 'politics of erasure' to capture ways in which existing pedagogies uncomplicate racism and discrimination, demonising those who challenge these ideas (1992:4).

The provision of basic education in postcolonial states are entangled in a web of past and present hegemonic forces. Mignolo (2007) understands coloniality of power as being the 'darker side of modernity and the global reach of imperial capitalism' (p. 159). Prevailing educational discourses are heavily impacted by the asymmetrical global power structures that focus on the values and practices in Global North territories (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). In an earlier speech, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012) observed that coloniality as power manifests in four ways, all of which have implications for education, both what is taught and the context in which that learning occurs. Firstly, control of the economy (dispossession, land control, controlling of resources); secondly, control of authority (a monopolisation over the means of violence such as the military); thirdly, power of gender and sexuality (reimagining the 'family' in terms of Eurocentric ideals); and lastly, control of subjectivity and knowledge (that positions African as inferior and is 'constituted by a series of deficits' and 'lacks' (Quinjano 2007:168–187; Grosfoguel 2007:214 cited in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012:2). As such, coloniality of power infiltrates deeply into the dynamics of teaching and learning, in terms of content and also social relations. Mather (2017) astutely observes that 'the legacy and persistence of colonial power relations and binaries can be seen in contemporary practices of schooling throughout the world' (p. 3), reinforcing the fact that the colonial mechanisms of assimilation, inclusion and power remain heavily embedded in post-colonial education systems curtailing true transformation.

Experiences of schooling in post-apartheid South Africa

There have been many comprehensive studies conducted in South Africa that discuss challenges relating to the integration of children into multiracial contexts and documenting experiences of alienation, isolation, racism, and ostracisation (see Amnesty International 2020; Equal Education 2015; Soudien 2012; Spaull & Jansen 2019). Coupled with this, popular media are often inundated with stories about children experiencing blatant racism and discrimination at school (see Metelerkamp 2022; Pijoos 2023). The study conducted by Vally and Dalamba (1999), initiated by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), synthesises many of the contemporary schooling experiences despite the datedness of the research, which suggests that not much has changed over the last three decades. The study sampled 90 schools across all 9 provinces of the country investigating racial conflict, human rights, racial tension, and integration within public schools. The study found that:

> [T]he situation in schools is far from complementary. In fact very little progress has been made to ensure an end to racial discrimination and prejudice in schools … Efforts at racial integration have not achieved the desired results, in part because learners approach school with the prejudices imbued in their home environments and the schools have no mechanisms to challenge and stimulate the unlearning of ingrained prejudices, as well as transform the minds of learners. Educators exhibit little or no commitment to constructing a learning environment free from discrimination and prejudice. Too many prefer to deny the existence of racism or presume a superficial tolerance. Some prefer to have their schools as laboratories for cultural assimilation where black learners are by and large tolerated rather than affirmed as of right… school playgrounds are battlefields between black and white school goers. Formerly white schools have become theatres of struggle for transformation as black parents demand access for their children. (Vally & Dalamba 1999:vii).

This report, released by the SAHRC, provides insights into the lived realities of many poor and black school goers in South Africa. By equating school grounds to battlefields is

suggestive of the (systemic and emotional) violence perpetuated by institutional culture and the persons that occupy its spaces. It is important to acknowledge that these violent experiences are not as simple as white orchestrating racism towards non-white; it is much more complicated and nuanced than that because coloniality lives in all of us from the elites to the oppressed (Silvia Rivera Cusacanqui cited in Dulfano 2014).

Integration and the effect of merit-based scholarship programmes and opportunities on poor black children

Transformation in South Africa has permutated into very different realities for different races. The effects of economic policies, such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE), affirmative action and racial quotas, have resulted in an emerging non-white middle class, as they give previously disadvantaged persons opportunities that were previously denied to them because of their race. These economic policies changed not only the landscape of business and enterprise but also education and schooling, as children from the emerging non-white middle class find themselves in previously inaccessible school settings previously only afforded to white and wealthy families. For academically gifted working-class children and children who come from poor households, primary and high school merit scholarships are an appealing option to ensure quality basic education and increase the chances of tertiary education, and increased earning potential.

However, research into the psychological effects of merit-based scholarships on poor and black children when they move to schools where the dominant culture and race are different from their own, is very limited in the South African context. Emphasis is often placed on university and college students, but very little on the experiences of children within the basic education context (Henry & Rubenstein 2002; Monks 2008; Sjoquist & Winters 2012; Wildschut Megbowon & Miselo 2020). Although some of the effects experienced by college students can be transposed to high school students, the context is essentially different with the one big difference being age and vulnerability. College students are classified as adults and may have higher emotional resilience than children who are still developing their sense of self. The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (2022) observes that children who are exposed to discrimination from a young age are disproportionately affected by depression and anxiety. Therefore, while the phenomenon is well documented, the context in which these studies are conducted is skewed in favour of colleges and universities.

However, apart from documented accounts in popular media (see Nierenburg & Heyward 2022) one comprehensive study conducted by Arrington and Stevenson (2006) in the United States of America (US) focussed on the experiences of African American children who attend predominantly white independent schools. It investigated issues relating to school climate, relationships, and mental health, among others. This mixed methods study was conducted over a period of 5 years and found that 75% of children felt they had to make a special effort to fit into the school community, 82% reported having negative experiences at school, and almost half of the children who participated in the study did not believe that everyone at the school was treated the same way. The study also highlighted multiple experiences of racism and racial dissonance. What this suggests is that coloniality persists long after colonialism, and that culture is more powerful than politics.

Conceptual framing

To use a framework of exclusion only to explain the phenomenon observed in this article would be reductionist, to say the least. As the article later demonstrates, what Nomzamo Maliwa, the participant, experienced during her schooling years is much more than that. It is about exclusion, cultural dissonance, microaggression, hegemonic manipulation, and racism. All of these concepts represent a lack of social justice and, for this reason, this article is underscored by this. Social justice, as a verb not as performative activism, is foundational to transformation, particularly in democratic and post-conflict settings. It requires action and change, both inward and outward. It is about changing draconian and violent social orders by systematically (re)conscientising society about the pitfalls of social inequities.

As such, this article draws on the work of highly influential scholars Bell (2016) and De Sousa Santos (2007). Bell (2016:3), in her book chapter entitled *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, observes that 'the goal of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs'. She cites Kreisberg (1992) when she argues that the 'power with' rather than a 'power over' paradigm is required for enacting social justice. Thus, to overcome coloniality and to pursue decoloniality requires a recognition of prevailing imbalances of power and to restructure this is to acknowledge the 'other' as equal rather than problematic or 'less than'.

Similarly, De Sousa Santos (2007) emphasises the importance of acknowledging other ways of being by questioning social hegemony using the structures of scientific knowledge as a basis for discussion. He argues that:

> Modern knowledge and modern law represent the most accomplished manifestations of abyssal thinking … In the field of knowledge, abyssal thinking consists in granting to modern science the monopoly of the universal distinction between true and false … The exclusionary character of this monopoly is at the core of the modern epistemological disputes between scientific and nonscientific forms of truth … Their visibility is premised upon the invisibility of forms of knowledge that cannot be fitted into any of these ways of knowing … lay, plebeian, peasant, or indigenous knowledges [*are*] on the other side of the line. (De Sousa Santos 2007:46–47)

Both Bell (2016) and De Sousa Santos (2007) illuminate how coloniality and dominance of western knowledge systems

and cultural practices, including linguistic preferences, result in exclusionary social mechanisms to the detriment of minorities, especially children, in how they are educated and how they navigate educational institutions.

Research methods and design

This section maps out the study methodology, including the sampling strategy, the data analysis, the instruments, the research approach, and the ethical considerations. This article forms part of a larger qualitative study that investigated several teachers journey to becoming teachers in a post-apartheid context, and reflections on how their own schooling experiences have shaped their current practices. As such, this article is based on the findings of one of the respondents, a primary school teacher, as she recalls her journey of receiving an academic scholarship during her schooling years.

Research approach

This was a qualitative study that employed semi-structured interviews to elicit data. Qualitative techniques are powerful tools that can provide thick descriptions of lived experiences. The respondent was asked to reflect on her life and report on critical moments related to becoming a teacher.

Sampling strategy

For this study, snowball sampling was used. A request for participation went out on social media (Facebook and WhatsApp). The study invited qualified teachers with no intersectional or geographical limitations, but had to be based in South Africa.

Data collection instruments and process

The data collection took place over a period of 3 months. The respondent completed two 60 min semi-structured interviews and one checklist. Interview Schedule A asked about respondents' personal backgrounds, about her schooling experiences, her post schooling experiences and the context of schools at which she currently teaches. Interview Schedule B asked about respondents' roles and responsibilities at school, the impact of COVID-19 on her teaching practices, her experiences of work-life balance, professional development opportunities, challenges of being a teacher and her motivation for staying in the profession. The checklist collected the demographic information. It was more time-efficient to send a checklist rather than ask these questions in the interview. These interviews were conducted online as this was the preference of the respondent. The interviews that were conducted online were recorded using MS Teams.

Data analysis

The data of the checklists were entered into an excel spreadsheet and manipulated using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, IBM, Version 27). Both interviews were transcribed by professional transcribers and was quality checked with the interviewer. The interviews were coded manually, using excel to map themes and trends.

Informed consent

The respondent was informed about her rights as research participants, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without fear of negative repercussions. The respondent gave verbal consent, which was recorded. The respondent was also told that she could request to see the ethical approval of the project if she so wished.

Anonymity and confidentiality

The name of the participant and institutions have been changed to protect anonymity. All the data are stored on an external device with access only provided to key personnel on this project. Original names of the respondent and institutions will not be used in any research output resulting from this project.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Education Faculty Ethics committee (No. (EFEC 10-2/2020)).

Results

This section presents extracts from the interview conducted with Nomzamo Maliwa, as she reflected on her experiences of schooling in post-apartheid South Africa about 15 years ago. The findings presented here focus mainly on her experiences of receiving a scholarship to attend an affluent private school in South Africa, which was preceded by an opportunity to visit the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in the US. The section commences with some background information about Nomzamo. This is followed by the extracts and the analysis thereof. The following paragraph provides an overview of Maliwa's demographic information and family life. It also provides information about her schooling journey and the opportunities that she received.

Nomzamo Maliwa: Background

Nomzamo Maliwa, self-identifies as an isiXhosa-speaking, Black South African female, between the ages of 31years and 40 years. She grew up in the Western Cape Province, one of the wealthier provinces in the country. Her childhood was spent in an urban township called Phillipi, where she lived with her mum, who worked at a local butchery, her father who was mostly unemployed, and her three brothers. She attended (Lily) Primary and then, at her grandparent's request, moved to (Tulip) Primary School. She spent most of her high school years at (Blossom) Township High School. Here she won an essay writing competition that gave her an opportunity to fly to NASA in the US, spending several days learning about space. Upon her return, she received an academic scholarship to attend (St Agnes) High School.

She spent 1 year at St Agnes High School and left to attend (Technology High). The pressure and trauma she experienced in the latter part of her high school life led her to temporarily drop out of school. She completed her matric qualification at (Good)College.

It is important to make the distinction between learners who attend former Model C schools with the hopes of being granted better quality education and learners who received academic scholarships to attend affluent schools. Prior to receiving the scholarship, Nomzamo attended a township school. The scholarship covered all her educational expenses. Learners who migrate to former Model C schools (often referred to as commuter schools) from township schools, often do not receive any financial incentive but may in some cases, be exempt from paying school fees because of the family's weak financial situation.

The first extract below presents the initial part of the interview, where Nomzamo was asked to reflect on her experiences of primary school and high school in post-apartheid South Africa:

> 'Tell me about your experiences of school, primary and high school, what do you remember about it?' (Female, Indian, Researcher)

> 'I have so many great memories of school actually, because I sort of immersed myself at school. I played all sorts of sports; I was the captain of everything and I got so many awards, academic awards, I got sports awards … that's how I got away from growing up the way that I did. You know, with Primary School, I was just shining the whole time and also in high school. Actually even in high school, I won an essay writing competition, and I went to NASA in the States, I went to visit Jet Propulsion Laboratory, JPL, so I mean I got good memories actually …' (Female, Black, Primary School Teacher)

Initially, Nomzamo opined she had very good experiences in primary and high school, and explained that she excelled in all areas of school life. As a result of her diligence and academic achievements, she won an essay writing competition that gave her a fully funded opportunity to visit the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in the US.

The next extract enquired about the racial composition of the school. The rationale for asking this question was to ascertain the school context she attended that may have contributed to her good memories:

> 'Okay. ... What was the racial makeup of your school, was … it mixed?' (Female, Indian, Researcher)

> 'All black, all black both so Primary School, all black and High School, all black until I got a scholarship to go to St Agnes, you know, after I won this competition and went to NASA, and then I got back and then which was like, you know, 85% or 90% white but the majority … of my school years were spent in black schools.'

Here Nomzamo provides insight into the racial composition of the learner population at the school. In the township of Philippi where she grew up, the learners at the schools are predominantly

black. Schools located within townships are categorised as quintile one, two and, in some instances, three, according to the Department of Basic Education's school poverty index. These schools are often under-resourced with a high learner-to-teacher ratio, even as high as 60:1. The Western Cape Education Department (2013) observes that this poverty ranking is determined nationally and is based on the geographical space in which the school is situated as well as some infrastructural considerations. Schools in South Africa that have been classified as quintiles one, two or three are no-fee paying schools, and quintiles four and five are fee-paying schools. In 2022, the Western Cape Education Department forecasted 2023 allocations for quintile one to three schools to be R1 602.00 per learner, quintile four schools to be R803.00 per learner and quintile five schools R277.00 per learner, highlighting the substantial differences between the allocations. The poverty index was introduced as a form of equitable redress. This financial formula intended to equalise education opportunities and contexts across schools in the country. However, many other factors have prevented this from happening, with poorer schools still experiencing many of the same dilemmas as they did in 1994 (Motala & Carel 2019; Singh 2020, 2022). A study conducted by Singh (2020) that focussed on learners' experiences of their schooling context in the Western Cape Province of South Africa demonstrated that, at quintile one schools, both in the urban and rural contexts, schools are characterised by overcrowding, a lack of textbooks and other learning materials, little or no access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), inadequate libraries, dilapidated buildings, and very poor ablution facilities.

Nomzamo also mentioned that all the learners at her primary school and high school (before she left in Grade 10) were black, suggesting a fully racially homogenous context. In this context, apart from foreign nationals, who are black, learners at the schools share the same cultural, racial and, in most instances, linguistic roots. When Nomzamo left to go to St Agnes, she became a minority with most of the learners at the school being white. Research conducted in South Africa demonstrates that, where schools are more homogenous, the levels of social cohesion are higher. The opposite is the case for racially integrated schools in South Africa (Singh 2020). This is possibly one factor that led to her feelings of isolation and depression, which are highlighted later in this section.

The next extract enquired about why she left Blossom High School and why her move to St Agnes was so short-lived given that it remains one of the most prestigious schools in the country and that she had an academic scholarship for the remainder of her high school years at the school. Her reason, as shown below, was simple, she 'couldn't cope':

> 'So, for which grades were you at St Agnes?' (Female, Indian, Researcher)

> 'Grade 10 … so I only went for Grade 10 and then I actually left in grade 11. I couldn't cope, I couldn't transition; it was too much pressure, then I left. Then I went to, actually, to Good College, so Good College is coloureds, is blacks.' (Female, Black, Primary School Teacher)

'Cope? What do you mean, what happened?' (Female, Indian, Researcher)

'So, during the time this black girl [*referring to herself*] coming from a township, suddenly has all of this attention. I had the president coming to visit me at my school. Everyone had so much expectations. I was on TV in the news. I mean, you know, I was staying in the shack and imagine now I'm on TV and everyone has this expectations. So, like for me to do well for me, for me to attend everything … I started to suffer academically. I was too overwhelmed, people looking at me like I'm a celebrity and, you know, all of this. So, when I got to St Agnes, I mean, it was a new environment … I wasn't used to even spending time with white people now suddenly staying with all of them here. I don't have my parents and, you know, I just have to get used to … firstly, used to how things go … I could communicate with them … But I still somehow felt inferior to these rich white kids. Their parents are like, there is this one girl, her dad owned [*mentions a reputable clothing brand*], you know, the clothing and … And one's father was a politician okay and so, all of these things, they played a factor into me feeling a bit insecure.' (Female, Black, Primary School Teacher)

Nomzamo reflected on how all the attention of being 'the scholarship kid who visited NASA' put immense pressure on her to succeed. Firstly, she mentioned that the attention she received from the NASA opportunity was overwhelming for her and negatively impacted her academic performance. The link between mental health and poor academic performance of children is well documented, as Amutio et al. (2015), and López-González et al. (2016) conclude that learners' well-being is critical to academic performance. In addition, as a scholarship recipient, there is pressure to ensure good academic standing often to keep funders satisfied. Marqueiro (2022) observes that there is immense pressure on scholarship recipients to succeed, especially those who hail from poor backgrounds and are financially needy. The pressure is also exacerbated by not wanting to disappoint family (Marqueiro 2022).

Secondly, in her new environment at St Agnes, the cultural, racial, and economic dissonance severely impacted her ability to perform academically and led to her feeling insecure. Martinez-Taboada et al. (2017) opined that an education process, such as schooling, is essential in constructing the psychosocial trajectories of youth. These authors also argue that 'positive recognition and legitimisation of students' personal, social, and cultural characteristics as well as their potential for development are essential to facilitate educational processes' (Amutio et al. 2015:9). This means that schools are spaces where youth learn emotional intelligence and how to calibrate their emotions in different situations. In order to do this, schools need to provide a positive, welcoming, and accepting environment.

The given extract and Nomzamo's experiences at her new school clearly demonstrate the bifurcation of schooling contexts in South Africa. On the one hand, there are under-resourced, overcrowded, dilapidated schools and, on the other hand, there are schools that do not fall short of any educational infrastructure and where the context for teaching and learning is optimal.

The next extract enquired about the reaction of people in her home environment and community and whether they supported her through this opportunity in any way. The following extract suggests that the community contributed to her anxiety as they started treating her as an 'other':

'And what was the reaction from people in the township and family?' (Female, Indian, Researcher)

'… again, when I go home to the Township, everyone is like, hey Nomzamo, now you are a celebrity, this and this and that. Family members are turning on me you know … And obviously, I'm 15, hormones I'm a teenager and I'm everywhere, … well trying to but I can't because everyone is watching. I can't be a normal teenager, and it's like everyone wanted a piece of me like in terms of attention, others just started to act different, you know, I'm 15 through all of these. Suddenly, there is now money available and I'm staying in a shack and now suddenly I have a card that has R10 000.00. You know, it was quite a lot and it was overwhelming, it was shocking, it was new and, in the midst of all of this, and no one actually sat me down, and said 'look, listen', even my mum is excited, leaving my parents *deurmakaar* [*confused*] like I was.' (Female, Black, Primary School Teacher)

Nomzamo observed how family members and people in the township added to the pressure, either by distancing themselves or perpetuating her celebrity status. The alienation of family or community, because of her sudden economic support, has also been noted by Kim (2014) who, although not referring to the education context, notes that there is a correlation between economic achievement and alienation across cultures. Kasser (2002) also notes that high economic achievement can lead to poorer relationships with the community. This alienation also made adolescence a challenging journey.

Furthermore, Nomzamo highlighted a very important issue relating to children from poor families who receive cash scholarship funds. In contexts where families are largely unemployed or have little to no income, scholarship funds are often used to supplement and support the recipient's family. Nomzamo mentioned how the money that she received made her mother happy and overwhelmed by the sudden substantial monthly income. She also mentioned that she did not receive any financial advice on how to best manage the funds she received. In the South African context, where unemployment is rife, it is not surprising that scholarship funds are used to cater to basic needs.

The next extract prompted her to speak about other sources of her pressure:

'So, you mention family and friends started distancing themselves and people in the township kept punting your celebrity status; did this happen at school as well?' (Female, Indian, Researcher)

'… I'm still expected to be the NASA girl and even the girls that I was studying with started putting pressure on me because now, academically, I'm too busy, I have to attend this, I have to attend that, and now they like "oh NASA girl, how are you doing with your studies?" Or they could see that I wasn't getting those good marks that I was expected to get. Forgetting that I am coming from a Blossom Township High School to a very different context

of learning, you know. I don't know if the curriculum was the same but it was very challenging. … You know, no-one sat me down and said "take a breath, breathe. I understand this is all new, you need to adjust, this is what you can do and what you cannot do and I understand that you are just a teenager". You know, I never got any of that. I started being angry and at school I started being depressed, I remember I had a fight and I mean I'm not a person that fights but I had a fight. I slapped this girl because I was lashing out at the boarding house. And it's like I was melting away and everyone was expecting NASA girl to do so well, so without knowing what was happening.' (Female, Black, Primary School Teacher)

The added requirements that accompanied the scholarship, such as attending many social or media events, resulted in Nomzamo not being able to maintain her usually good academic standard. Her dwindling results were noticed by classmates and the vocalising of her underperformance contributed to her anxiety. She also observed that the transition from Blossom Township High School to St Agnes, in terms of teaching and learning context, required her to adjust and this was not taken into consideration as a factor that may contribute to her self-reported underperformance. Research suggests that children's class background will impact their classroom experiences (Southall 2016). As such, Nomzamo's experience of cultural dissonance, feelings of inferiority and challenges adjusting to the new environment are understandable. The differences in how the curriculum was facilitated in the classroom also posed a challenge. This could have been because of the additional resources or pedagogies that were employed.

The extract also suggests that she did not receive psychosocial support to assist her with the transition, causing her to lash out physically. This, to some extent, is not surprising given that black children from working class homes often lack access to proper mental health resources and psychological support, and they often fully rely on school services (Pottiger 2022). In many cases, these services are unavailable or insufficient. In the case of Nomzamo, the school was well-resourced and could have provided her with support but, as she noticed, no one knew what was happening, meaning her struggles were not identified. Professional support could have prevented the physical altercations and provided her with the skills to transition more smoothly. More importantly, while psychosocial support could have reduced her anxiety, it also highlights the school's inability to accommodate differences and by doing so, reasserting their cultural dominance and power – key mechanisms of coloniality.

The next extract enquired whether she noticed any substantial differences between Blossom Township High School and St Agnes in terms of subjects being taught or pedagogy. She observed that the lack of access to ICTs made it impossible for her to cope in programming class:

> 'Did you see a difference in the content of what was taught, or do you remember at St Agnes learning things differently than what you were accustomed to at Blossom Township High School?' (Female, Indian, Researcher)

> 'Well, I think I was able to comprehend the stuff I was learning. I did have though a big problem with programming I couldn't do it, I couldn't do it because I wasn't used to a computer. Yes, I knew how to type and obviously how to do basic things that's the one thing I struggled with programming … and I started feeling like am I really this NASA girl?, and why am I even here, you know, everything just went downhill.'

The given extract highlights differences in the kinds of subject offerings between Blossom Township School and St Agnes. Nomzamo's lack of access to computers negatively impacted her ability to excel and increased her feelings of isolation and negative self-worth. Again, this alludes to the challenges of transitioning from a generally poor-resourced school to a well-resourced school. In this context, Herd (2021) suggests that children in these contexts should be provided with better support as a lack of support can negatively impact children's social-emotional learning and academic progression.

The final extract below, elicited information about the physical altercation, the repercussion, and how her leaving the school was facilitated. It also highlights the rest of the high school journey and how she eventually completed her high school diploma:

> 'Tell me more about this fight. What happened after that and when did you decide to leave?' (Female, Indian, Researcher)

> 'Ja, you know, so when I had the fight, I slapped the girl she slapped me back … I had to clean some brass items at the boarding house [*as punishment*] … [*then*] I was called by Mamfundisi [*a priest at the boarding house*] and she just sat down with me and said let's talk, you know. I burst out in tears, I just cried … like I had too much; I just burst out in tears, and I can't remember what else we spoke about but we spoke about the fight and the punishment … After that, they [*school management*] suggested I leave … and I was actually happy to leave. I was happy at that moment to go.' (Female, Black, Primary School Teacher)

> 'What happened after that?' (Female, Indian, Researcher)

> '[*T*]hen before going there [*Good College*] I went to Technology High and obviously kids get to know about this [*the prize and the scholarship*] … so now the black kids there are like we know where she is from, she is from this and now, and who do you think you are you are not there anymore you are here. And imagine now, I have to fight my battles now you know and I am adjusting to the school but I couldn't, that I ended up dropping out, you know, out of school. … I was, I couldn't cope. I just I took the year off and then the following year I found this Good College and my dad actually paid for me. It was on a monthly basis something like R 1000.00. I mean, he couldn't really afford that, you know, but he made means because, me not attending school that is something that, I mean, "my child went to the United States of America and now she's sitting at home and doing nothing". So they got scared … and thinking I'm going to end up like all the typical township girls … I was just sitting there; I started feeling more depressed … I was in America and I was in St Agnes and now I'm sitting at home and that made me to feel like, oh my god …'. (Female, Black, Primary School Teacher)

This extract powerfully depicts how, after she broke down with the school priestess, it was suggested she leave the school. There was no suggestion to help her through her emotional journey. The extract also shows her refusal to assimilate and resistance to the school culture led to a

unilateral decision, assumably by the school management, for her to leave the school and forego the academic scholarship. In the context of coloniality, it suggests that although the school may be technically racially inclusive, it displays cultural oppressiveness by not accepting and even trying to understand Nomzamo's context. She paid a heavy price for her refusal to assimilate and for asserting herself in an unwelcoming context.

This further suggests that the funders had very little knowledge about transitioning into different cultural and academic contexts, and the turmoil it may cause for young learners. Nomzamo also noticed that, when she left St Agnes, she briefly attended Technology High, but could not cope with the criticism from learners about her 'fall from grace', which led to her dropping out of school for an entire year. Her access to financial support and privileged schools led to her being ostracised by her peers who are of the same race, speak the same language, and attend the same school. This suggests that alienation and ostracisation can go both ways, with black students also alienating those who have different life experiences than themselves.

Fearing that their daughter may end up like a 'typical township girl' (i.e. having limited education and poor life prospects), seeing her spiral deeper into a depression and not able to cope with her own perceived failure, her family ensured she completed her matric by enrolling her into a college. Nomzamo's experience of 'losing' her academic scholarship is not unprecedented. A study conducted at Georgia State University revealed the shocking result that 60% of African American students lost their scholarships in 2 years (Bugler, Henry & Rubenstein 1999). Another study, conducted at the University of Missouri, found similar results and established that African American males are more likely to lose their academic scholarships (Hurst 2012). Professor Menifield, a researcher on the Missouri study found that 'race turns out to be one of the best predictors of scholarship retention rates' and the research strongly suggests that 'colleges and universities that desire to maintain diversity should at minimum target minority students … and determine how best to improve academic success' (cited in Hurst 2012). Although these studies were conducted in the higher education context, the sentiment is relevant to school contexts. As such, schools also have a responsibility to find ways of helping children from minority groups integrate better. By doing so, it will reflect their commitment to diversity, transformation and social justice, and it will help eradicate toxic school cultures, microaggression and dysconscious racism.

The experiences reported by Nomzamo vividly illuminate the daily schooling experiences of many school goers in South Africa. These children are victims of the 'cultural bomb' of coloniality.

Conclusion

South Africa's first democratic election was enthralled in promise and there was a certainty that this new dispensation would fulfil the prayers that echoed along prison walls for decades. However, almost 30 years after this hopeful event, for many children who reside within its borders, South Africa has become the 'wretched of the earth'. However, there have been some positive developments, especially in education. Schools are now technically integrated, and equitable policy mechanisms have been put into effect to address social inequities, one of these being education scholarships for poor black children who otherwise may not have the opportunity at good quality education, giving them the possibility for future economic success. This article emerges from the truism that there has been a limited focus on the personal accounts of children who have received these opportunities. The article highlighted that, despite the multiple (educational) opportunities provided to previously disadvantaged persons, these opportunities are often laden with cultural and hegemonic expectations that make them challenging to navigate, often rendering the experience as traumatic rather than developmental. This scholarly contribution reveals the pervasiveness of coloniality that continues to permeate educational institutions in South Africa. The findings also demonstrate that, when children are unable to assimilate, they are ostracised, which can result in foregoing these scholarships and missed opportunities. In the context of these findings, three key suggestions emerge to mitigate these kinds of experiences. Firstly, the fact that none of Namazi's teachers could identify her struggles means they were perhaps not trained to do so. Thus, teacher preparation programmes need to ensure these kinds of discussions dominate teacher training classrooms, particularly in post-colonial settings. If teachers had identified her challenges, they may have been addressed and perhaps she may not have needed to leave the school and miss the opportunities that accompany such an achievement. Secondly, the academic scholarship was provided to her without facilitation. This means that Nomzamo was left to navigate this new environment alone. Even the financial support was overwhelming. This suggests that when children receive these opportunities, it requires psychosocial support to assist them integrate more seamlessly. Lastly, the tension between the girls at the school and Nomzamo made visible the lack of dialogue about social diversity within the school. The response of the school brought out how mechanisms of coloniality, particularly cultural hegemony, remain deeply embedded within post-colonial schooling systems, even when policies propel inclusion, respect, and dignity. Schools, through their leadership, need to have discussions with teachers, learners, and parents that problematises racism and inclusion, to sensitise these cohorts into the lived realities of others. An empathetic environment could have mitigated many of Nomzamo's experiences. It is indeed a long walk to freedom, but we will eventually arrive – with our children.

Acknowledgements

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to confidentiality and are available from the corresponding author, M.S., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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