

Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)

Volume: 7 Special Issue June 2018

pp. vi-ix

ersc.nmmu.ac.za

ISSN: 2221-4070

Editorial

Decolonising Education in South Africa: Perspectives and Debates

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The politics of knowledge in South African universities has recently witnessed a radical discursive rupture. The call for decolonising education was a cornerstone of students' recognition struggles at universities. Mobilising on the basis of their demand for free education, students across the university sector expressed the need for change in university knowledge and curricula in the light of what they described as their exposure to Eurocentric, racist, and sexist knowledge at untransformed institutions. They argued that such a knowledge orientation is at the heart of their experience of alienation at the university. They suggested that only the complete overhaul of the curriculum on the basis of a decolonising education approach would provide them the type of educational access that addresses their emerging African-centred humanness.

This special themed issue of this journal focuses on the decolonising education imperative, which has raised fundamental questions about reframing the purposes of education. Centring Africa-centric epistemology is at the heart of this educational reframing. This special themed edition is based on the view that what is required is a conceptual approach and languages of description that move the decolonising education debate towards consideration about the terms on which knowledge selection for a decolonial curricular approach ought to proceed. In other words, the debate should enter the substantive terrain about the bases on which curricula in universities, schools, and colleges are constituted. I argue that a decolonial politics of knowledge, despite exemplary activity at a few universities to develop decolonial curricular approaches, operates at the level of ideas, symbols, and politics. Instead, the debate should now turn to considerations about the terms of the knowledge and curriculum veracity of a decolonial approach. The discussion should therefore shift to what counts as curriculum knowledge based on decoloniality, and the conceptual bases on which university departments, programmes, and course modules would organise their curriculum knowledge assemblages based on such an approach.

Calls for decolonising education first emerged on the African continent in the context of decolonising struggles against colonial rule during the 1950s and 1960s. It is based on a negation of modern colonial education whose organising principle centred on shaping the colonised into colonial subjects, in the process, stripping them of their humanity and full potential. The knowledges of colonised groups, non-Europeans, and indigenous folk were suppressed or, as the decolonial scholar, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) explained, their knowledges suffered a form of *epistemicide* which signifies their evisceration from the knowledge canon.

The knowledge of the (colonial) university or school paid little to no attention to indigenous knowledges, the knowledges of the working poor, or the literacies of urban black female dwellers, for example. It favoured the Western canon, founded on a separation of the modern Western knowledge from its non-Western knowers, suggesting that modern knowledge would help instantiate modern subjects. Becoming a modern subject was the fulcrum of colonial education. This view has been called into radical controversy by the students' recent calls for decolonising education. They are demanding a type of cognitive justice based on an expansion and complete overhaul of the western knowledge canon. The call is also for knowledge pluralisation, which refers to incorporation of the complex ways of knowing of subaltern and all previously excluded groups. These calls represent a principled negation of a Western-centric knowledge orientation. Instead, decolonising education is based on the inclusion of all knowledge forms bequeathed to humanity including African, indigenous, Arab-Islamic, Chinese, Hindu, Indo-American, Asiatic, and Western knowledge forms. This all-inclusive approach to knowledge is based on an inter-cultural understanding of multiple and heterodox forms of being human. All knowledge forms have to be brought into play in intercultural education that promotes a type of epistemic openness to the knowledges of all human beings. This approach would seek to undermine *knowledge parochialism*, which is the idea that one's own knowledge system is superior and thus sufficient for complex living. The call is for schools, colleges, and universities to cultivate respect for people and their cultural and knowledge systems. These institutions should make available to their students knowledges across the widest possible human spectrum. University curricula should work across the various knowledge and science systems to establish dialogical platforms about actual and potential futures.

Decolonising education eschews static knowledge orientations. It is founded on a type of complex knowledge dynamism in fidelity to disciplinary and transdisciplinary foundations, and always alert to a type of problem-posing dynamism. In other words, knowledge constructions ought to be approached as dynamic, disciplined, and patient constructions that advance sustainable livelihoods. The call for decolonising education is nothing less than the full incorporation of humanity's knowledge systems into the curriculum and knowledge selection systems of universities and schools. The modalities of such incorporation, I believe, ought to be the subject of urgent conversation in policy circles, among curriculum workers, learning materials and textbook designers, and, crucially, among university lecturers and school teachers.

Simphiwe Sesanti takes the bull by the horns in the first article of this themed edition. His article is a carefully argued plea for teaching ancient Egyptian ethics and history as a cornerstone of an Afrocentric decolonial curriculum knowledge approach. Such a perspective, he suggests, challenges the continuing dominance of colonial scholarship in African universities. The article uses the concepts of *Afrocentricity* and *Africa-centredness* as an interpretive framework to inform Sesanti's unfolding perspective and arguments. The article centres the study of Ancient Egypt in African higher learning, and Sesanti suggests that such an approach will go a long way in framing the manner in which philosophy and ethics are taught.

In the next article, Noor Davids uses the case study of urban forced removals as central to his argument for a decolonising pedagogy. He argues that, notwithstanding the dominance of negative memories of such removals, a productive, decolonised version of forced removals can make a positive contribution to social cohesion. Davids offers as framework, a multiple historical case study of three pre-apartheid cosmopolitan spaces that were destroyed by the Group Areas Act (1950), to indicate how *ideology critique* can be employed as a decolonising pedagogy. A critical notion of cosmopolitanism is appropriated, via Davids' use of the notion of *production of space* to explain the role of political and social engineering in the making of place during the colonial-apartheid period. The article presents a conceptual approach for integrating notions of cosmopolitanism, segregation, and forced removals with a robust decolonising pedagogy based on what he calls ideology critique. Such a perspective

mobilises memory work to develop critical understanding of the past and its ongoing impact on contemporary discourses of spatial place-making practices.

Elizabeth Walton's article presents a reading of inclusive education informed by a decolonial perspective. She problematises the dominant perspective of inclusive education as constituting a neocolonial project, and an unwelcome imposition on countries of the Global South. She suggests that inclusive education can be seen as a form of coloniality in that knowledge from Euro-American countries dominates the field. Responding to this critique, Walton presents an Afrocentric model of inclusive education, citing scholars who claim that inclusive education is congruent with traditional African culture and community and resonates with *ubuntu*—a perspective that she suggests is not entirely unassailable. She posits an alternative perspective, which suggests that inclusive education might be harnessed to further the decolonial project, and that aspects of inclusive education can resist the coloniality of knowledge, of power, and of being. Such a position, she admits, may also be problematic, given that it could represent what has been termed *settler innocence*. The article ends with a useful set of suggestions for further research informed by a conceptual connection between inclusive education and decolonial perspectives.

Talitha Calitz's article is founded on a participatory approach to questions of students' (mis)recognition and decolonisation in South African higher education. The article is based on presenting narratives drawn from a participatory research project in which students contributed to the everyday work of decolonising higher education. As part of the scholarly and activist impetus for decolonising South African universities, the narratives draw attention to patterns of misrecognition of undergraduate student experiences. The first part of the article outlines an intersectional approach to student experiences to illustrate how binaries underpin epistemologies, pedagogy, and relationships at the university. In the final section, she outlines principles drawn from student narratives that can be used to reframe student recognition as part of the broader process of decolonising South African higher education.

Zayd Waghid and Liesel Hibbert's article is a discussion of the application of what they call a defamiliarisation pedagogy to interrogate the "colonialist" thoughts of preservice teachers. They start off by suggesting that social, political, and economic inequalities continue to shape the higher education landscape of the country. Using a case study at a university of technology that explicates teaching and learning through the use of creative illustrations as a form and means of defamiliarisation, the authors show how spaces can be created to facilitate deliberative engagement and contestation regarding instances of colonisation in higher education and society. They conclude that defamiliarisation should be considered a possible pedagogical technique in higher education as a way of deepening students' social, economic, political, and cultural awareness in relation to identity, language, and hierarchies of power in educational and other contexts.

Neo Maseko's article is a conceptual exploration of a decolonial perspective of the notion of *access with success*. The article draws attention to the significance of students' schooling backgrounds in the perpetuation of inequity that accrues from coloniality. Maseko presents the view that, what she calls, colonial cultural capital among students has ramifications for their access with success. She offers a counter strategy based on the decolonial turn as a tool to inform the development of students' emergent professional identities where a culture of critical consciousness is central to an emergent transformative praxis. This tool is used to draw attention to a critical decolonial social justice agenda that conceives of the university as a site for the inculcation of multidimensional critical change agency. She argues that a decolonial strategy of breaking the cycle that is informed by mentalities of coloniality is poised to play a pivotal role in the interests of social transformation.

The final article in this edition is by Maren Seehawer who discusses how South African science teachers integrate indigenous and Western knowledges in the classes. The article is based on a research project that aimed to understand how these teachers are integrating indigenous and Western knowledges in their classrooms. Following a participatory action research, the project explored whether and how indigenous knowledges (IK) could be integrated into the teachers' regular classes. While the South African science curriculum explicitly invites teachers to integrate indigenous knowledges, there is very little guidance about how this should be done—and there are no teaching materials available to inform their efforts at integration. Nevertheless, the article shows that all the teachers who formed part of the project were attempting to integrate indigenous knowledges in their science teaching by, for example, the use of learners' communities as resources—a strategy that worked well in both primary and secondary grades. The article calls for challenging the view of knowledge integration as untenable or difficult to pursue. While advocacy for top-down changes in education policy and practice, as well as theoretical debates on the unsolved questions regarding IK integration, remain important, Seehawer argues for a bottom-up approach, which places the work of science teachers at the centre of the integration efforts. Her article is an example of how education and IK stakeholders such as teachers, parents, learners, elders, traditional healers, teacher educators, and academics can exercise their agency and collaborate on implementing knowledge integration in education.

This special edition concludes with a conference report by Jasmine Matope on the 5th annual conference of the South African Education Research Association (SAERA) held in Port Elizabeth in October 2017.

References

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