

EDUCATION FOR THE “AFRICAN CHILD”: DISTANT ILLUSION?

One of the key features of post-apartheid South Africa has been an ongoing debate around access to quality education. Educational policy experts have decried what they have often termed a “dysfunctional” schooling system that fails to prepare students adequately for independent thinking and future life prospects. Prominent amongst the circulating debates have been important, yet peripheral issues such as resources, curriculum change and general inequality, forgetting the very real and systematic ways in which racial ideological thinking came to drive education in South Africa during apartheid.

This call sought to interrogate the construct of the “African child” and the educational provisions for African learners in South Africa 24 years after the collapse of apartheid. Understanding the very violent and embedded ways in which racial ideological thought and practice came to inform present day schooling practices and experiences, we were interested in an exploration of what it means to offer basic education to South African learners. In essence, we sought to interrogate the very notion of what it means to offer an education in an African context. A context rife with a history of colonialism and apartheid that sought to erase indigenous cultural and knowledge systems in ways that affected the ways of being, the ways of thinking, the ways of knowing and the ways of practice (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

Fully cognisant of the very ways in which the Eurocentric gaze continues to marginalise such work, or even view it as inconsequential and a rehashing of old ideas, we sought to prioritise identity, in particular racial identity, as a critical avenue for the study of schooling. We thus intentionally left the definition of what we meant by the “African child” open to contributor interpretation. We also opened the issue to submissions beyond the South African border as a way of acknowledging the ambiguous and unintelligible ways in which these borders were constructed in the first instance. Our view was also informed by the systemic manner in which imperialism, colonialism and apartheid shared their canon across the African continent. While of course we

acknowledge the marked differences in relation to postcolonial practice and experience, we also sought to foreground these differences with a view of informing our experiences and understanding.

One of the dangers we faced was that the very term “African child” triggered associations and evoked reactions relating to images that have been forged and perpetuated over time. It is not enough that Eiselen (1953), himself a child of missionaries and the architect of Bantu education, wrote this:

...education practice must recognise that it has to deal with a Bantu child, i.e. a child trained and conditioned in Bantu culture, endowed with a knowledge of a Bantu language and imbued with values, interests and behaviour patterns learnt at the knee of a Bantu mother. These facts must dictate to a very large extent the content and methods of his or her early education.

There were indeed submissions to this issue that repeated similar motifs, with similar content, differing only in that this complacent Eurocentric perspective was replaced by a complacent Afrocentric perspective. In one case, an image of just such a scene was submitted with the text. Such racial and cultural essentialism in South African education remains pervasive and sometimes barely troubled even by those who profess to decolonise, capturing and limiting our sense of imaginative possibility.

It is thus no surprise that some in the education community balked at the idea of engaging with the notion. After all, we run the danger of rehearsing old debates in which heated disagreements on issues of language, on issues of access to knowledge, on the balance between arts and technology, are on closer inspection revealed to resemble the all too neat divisions of yesteryear (Chisholm, 2018). Academics may easily find that their provocative and radical stance taken today uncomfortably echoes the stance of some reactionary from the past.

Our intention though was not to rehearse these debates, but to consider how in particular history and context have shaped basic education and the young people in it, and how young people are developing their own paths through education. We are also unapologetic about bringing these debates to the fore, as essentially this is, in part, what a project on decoloniality requires. It is for this reason that Mignolo (2011) argues that the central feature of decoloniality involves “epistemic disobedience and delink from the colonial matrix to open up decolonial options” (p. 9). The intent of this special issue was thus not to revisit these debates, but rather to disrupt what has come to be accepted as normal within education, thus opening new options.

The first set of articles interrogate the historical construction of the “African Child” in education policy and provision in South Africa. They examine the extent to which this identity has been problematised and/or pathologised in past and current policy and practice.

Guluza’s article, “*Moving beyond artificial linguistic binaries in the education of African Language speaking children: A case for simultaneous biliteracy development*”, argues that the current implementation of language policy has not been sufficiently problematised and that African language speaking children continue to experience racism, as well as an inferior education. She highlights the racist ideology behind the policy, showing how it constructs African language speaking children as inherently different from English and Afrikaans speaking children. Her article challenges the deficit positioning of the African child and shows that by moving beyond the false binary of mother tongue or English medium instruction, and by teaching bilingually, issues of power and marginalisation, may be addressed. She asserts that allowing children to draw on their full semiotic repertoire opens pathways for meaningful learning, self-conception and positive identity constructions.

In the article, “*A transformative exploration of epistemic individual(istic) identity formation within a synergistic decolonial student support system*”, Maseko explores the merits of individualism as associated with professional identity formation within a communal space that allows for the individual and collective good. By focusing on the intrinsic complexities of the African child who enters the academia with multiple epistemic identity contestations, Maseko interrogates the ensuing alienation from cultural displacement. It is argued that the African child is kept in a cyclical position of pathologising, subordination and subjugation within an unsupportive system. This article presents the Ubuntu philosophical orientation as a transformative pathway of transition into the multiple contextual nuances of identity formation.

In “*Pseudo-scientific intellectual theories of the African Child during the 20th century*”, Lewis asserts that even within the current democratic dispensation, in which the development and recognition of the whole child is advocated, racist thinking and practices in education persist. He examines selected pseudo-scientific racial theories on the mental abilities of the African child from a historical-educational perspective and how they were reflected within numerous educational policy documents, perceptions, thinking and practices at the time.

A number of articles deal with how the curriculum perpetuates rigid and limiting views of the African child but also how young people themselves demonstrate agency in negotiating their education. In “*Continuing in the shadows of colonialism: The educational experiences of the African Child in Ghana*”, Adzahlie-Mensah and Dunne draw on detailed observation, analysis of texts and interviews to demonstrate how in a Ghanaian primary school a colonial model of an African child is reproduced. Using a critical anti-colonial discursive framework, they explore how a systematic set of practices, from timetables to physical regimentation, language and cultural controls, devalue youngsters in a primary school. Their analysis portrays the curriculum as perpetuating epistemic violence. Hierarchies of age, gender and language serve to convey the subordination of the child and the subordination of their indigenous language and culture. This battery of practices serves to produce the inferiorisation and silencing of the African child. Their proposed remedy is to start with the voices of these children about their actual experience of schooling, an articulation that serves to portray them instead as critically minded and agentic.

Two case studies address a particular research gap: Soudien (2012:230) refers to the “insufficient empirical work on what strategies successful learners develop for themselves in a South African schooling system that is more notable on for its well-reported failings. Hemson, in “*Agency, resilience and innovation in overcoming educational failure*”, starts with a description of educational dysfunction. In contrast to the highly ordered regimentation and repression described in the previous paper, the school in this case study seems caught in conflict and incapable of enabling much learning. However, the study is an account of triumph, as a group of boys turns their failure and that of the institution into the opportunity for a remarkably confident demonstration of their own curricular prowess. Teaching themselves, each other and finally other classes in the school, through whatever resources they could muster, they achieved remarkable success in the matriculation exam and in their university studies. This is indeed a case of resilience, but the achievement is more than coping – they demonstrate how this marshalling of resources from township culture and formal learning leads to deep disciplinary learning and pleasure in intellect.

Pillay and Ngubane use a study of a single case, a young prison inmate, to break the static “single story” (Adichie, 2016) of an African child, in “*An African child inmate’s stories of schooling and the possibilities for self-change and self-care*”. As in the Ghanaian study, their focus is in part on the ways in which the lives of children are controlled and regulated, in this case through broader economic, social and legal structures. This is however also an account of educational agency and triumph in overcoming dislocation and obstacles. Through a realisation that his intention was “to help my brothers to live a decent life”, Bakhona focuses

on learning and then on tutoring as a way of asserting that commitment, echoing the strategy of self-development in the previous account of educational success. Through creative strategies of narrative enquiry, the authors reveal how his awareness of self and his own resourcefulness grew. The implication of these two articles is that schools need to consider how learner agency and initiative can best be mobilised.

Reygan challenges the “single story” from a different perspective, in “*Sexual and gender diversity in schools: Belonging, in/exclusion and the African child*”. He provides an account of how South African educational thought excluded questions of sexual and gender diversity in its framing of childhood, implicitly or explicitly, denying that an African child has any right but to be heterosexual. In part, the argument is how, in Southern Africa, “schools function as sites for the policing and control of gender and sexuality”. Policies that silence or exclude, uncritical textbooks, ill-prepared and uncomfortable teachers and hostile or violent school spaces serve to ensure exclusion. The acceptance of sexual and gender diversity requires addressing policies, teaching materials, teacher education and the context of the school. For a school to be fully inclusive of African children – to make Ubuntu real – requires attending to and addressing the multiple forms in which regulation and policing are still informed by damaging and oppressive beliefs and structures.

The article by Nxumalo and Mncube, “*Using indigenous games and knowledge to decolonise the school curriculum: Ubuntu perspectives*”, takes an interesting approach in exploring how indigenous games can be drawn into the school curriculum in ways that promote Ubuntu. Here we shift to the teacher’s perspective, in terms of the resources available to bring about change. The readers’ interest may in particular be on the ways in which the cultural expressions surrounding such games communicate specific values and meanings. The authors write that these games promote Ubuntu philosophy in the school curriculum, which “has been shown to stimulate critical thinking, creativity and promote collective values in learners”.

A different perspective is taken in an article that asks what needs to be done in teacher education to bring about decolonisation in schooling. Pillay and Swanepoel, in “*An exploration of higher education teachers’ experience of decolonising the Bachelor of Education honours curriculum at a South African University*”, take the stance that decolonisation in schools requires decolonisation in teacher education. They provide an account of lecturers at honours level who speak of their struggles in an attempt to decolonise and how this leads to a rethinking of what “curriculum” means. This struggle with meanings parallels some of the tensions and possibilities that teachers in schools need to engage with if they are to pursue decolonisation. They write, “It is only through critical examination and questioning that teachers will embody the skills to speak to the needs of the African child without the distorted lenses of Western influence; and in turn critically engage with the need to develop multicultural skills and competencies to cater to the African context.”

The last two articles can broadly be defined as having a policy focus. In the first article, De Wet and Osman, through an article entitled “*Ecological approach to childhood in South Africa: An analysis of the contextual determinants*”, focus on the educational attainments of African learners. Arguing that post-apartheid education reform and research has largely centred on individual and policy-level determinants of child development and educational outcomes in South Africa, the authors seek to foreground the role played by community and household composition on the attainment of learners. In particular, they focus on understanding the influence of socio-economic and demographic composition of communities and households on the repetition of grades by South African learners. Their data illustrates the intersecting ways in which race, gender, age and class come to influence grade repetition. The study concludes finds household and community poverty as negatively affecting learner progress in South African schools.

The special issue aptly concludes with Soudien's article entitled, "*Making a new South African Learner: An analysis of the South African Schools Act*", which essentially seeks to unpack the relationship between the South African Schools Act (SASA) (Republic of South Africa, 1996b), and learner identity. Understanding the centrality of history, memory, social and cultural institutions and power apparatuses in shaping identity, and indeed policy reform, Soudien critically unpacks the various ways in which SASA conceptualises a learner in the new South Africa. In particular, Soudien seeks to reflect on what the policy says about the South African learner, as well as its expectations of what a learner ought to be. The article seeks to develop an "understanding of the symbols and signifiers which are privileged in the formal and legal prescripts which surround the process of [identity] mediation. Importantly, Soudien asks us to reflect: "What significance this holds for the achievement of equality and justice in South Africa".

1. Conclusion

Reading this special issue from the concluding article backwards, and taking into consideration the accounts in which various authors have sought to highlight the colonial "wound" present in the daily experiences of African children, and of South African children in particular, it is important for a moment to ponder on the net effect of these wounds on the range of social crises that characterise our present day experiences. The papers presented here raise some ghosts from the past, debates that may have felt settled, but were not, with ongoing implications for the identity and experiences of learners in basic education. Essentially, we have to ask ourselves whether the disruptions that were sought via the SASA have been accompanied by the correct epistemic and socio-historical understandings to enable a disruption of old ways of thinking, thus opening up the possibility of a new order that humanises all our learners in the education system.

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