

# **COVID-19: ‘Opportune’ Moment for Epistemic Delinking from an Over-crowded Neoliberal Curriculum and Assessment Regime in South Africa**

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## **Abstract**

The unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic is having telling consequences globally. Developing nations like South Africa, with highly variegated education and health systems, are beginning to face particular challenges. The neoliberal contouring of South African society in the past three decades has rendered a ‘new’ class apartheid, a structural inequality, that has been generally ‘accepted’ as a ‘natural consequence’ in a post-conflict society. With regard to education, the application of market principles to the schooling system has rendered the State particularly inept at applying any ‘universal’ policy for teaching and learning in a neoliberal, class-stratified model during this time of ongoing contagion. The perversion of neoliberal principles and protocols in almost every aspect of school (and even university) education has been rampant and has insidiously strengthened its grip on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the South African school education context. It is thus the realisation that the debate as to what might constitute a response to the ‘new’ crisis (in education) is necessarily circumscribed within the contours of already well-demarcated parameters. Proximity limitations (social distancing) have illuminated the rigidity of the colonial model for schooling, rendering a paralysis to conventional teaching and assessment. This paper argues that COVID-19 has refocused attention on curriculum overload, and elaborate neoliberal assessment regimes that suffocate teaching and learning. Such a scenario presents an ‘opportune’ moment to reflect on much in education that has become normative over time. Epistemic delinking and border thinking present as useful theoretical heuristics for such critical reflection and action.

**Keywords:** assessment, curriculum, COVID-19, neoliberalism, decoloniality

## **1 Introduction**

In this paper I draw theoretical insights from the body of scholarship on decoloniality (Anzaldúa 1987; Grosfoguel 2013; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo 2002; 2011) to address the dilemma faced by the South African education system as it struggles to respond to the multiple and novel challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. I argue that the modern/colonial, neoliberal nation state's delusionary impulses as these relate to the purpose of education (both school and post-school) (Shore, 2010) and its pre-occupation with a neoliberal capitalist market ideology, have come home to roost. The colonial model, as it has been applied to almost every facet of human activity, is rapidly beginning to unravel. Note that this phenomenon is not peculiar to South Africa. It is indeed a brutally sobering realisation that the hegemonic coloniality-modernity-capitalist complex as this manifests across the world, is under siege (Bond 2014; Mignolo 2011).

I examine how the naturalness with which western-Eurocentric curriculum and assessment regimes have become embedded and reified in our collective psyches to the extent that we have accepted them as normative, sacrosanct ways in which the world of teaching and learning ought to be conducted. In every crisis, there exists opportunity to think anew, to recalibrate, for renewal with a vexed focus on addressing particular frailties in society (and education), that have been previously relegated to the backburner of the academic intellectual enterprise. Note that my intent is to offer an analysis of the paralysis the nation's education system currently faces, with a view to exposing why and how a sustained and embarrassing unevenness in South African education has perpetuated unchecked, and how this has become the Achilles heel that hopefully threatens the current neoliberal 'order' regulating school provisioning.

## **2 School Education and Neoliberal Contouring**

A frequently cited description of neoliberalism is that of David Harvey's, namely, that it represents a 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills [...] characterized [sic] by [...] free

markets, and free trade’ (Harvey 2007: 2). Neoliberalism subscribes to the notion of an active yet minimalist role for the State. In fact the role of the State is to create the conditions for markets to be conceived, including markets for social provisioning like education and health. The operation of such markets though should be free from State interference, as the market is deemed far more efficient and effective than the state at the allocation and use of society’s resources through active competition. Individual freedom of choice is a central tenet that neoliberals extol and ought to be guarded, irrespective of the current (highly unequal) lay of the metaphorical economic land. Such transactional neoliberal market persuasions have moved with considerable pace and stealth into education systems of the world since its genesis in the West (the United Kingdom and the United States) in the 1970s. Reeves asserts that with regard to education, two somewhat contradictory strains are at play, namely, that of ‘market-based free choice, in which individual consumers (parents, students) are empowered to choose their schools, and a master narrative on curriculum and teaching, in which knowledge and how it is to be delivered and measured is prescribed’ (Reeves 2018: 98). This particular scenario is germane in the South African education context.

Arguably the more lucid and overt manifestation of individual freedom (of school choice) is the economic class hierarchisation of the schooling sector in South Africa and the marginalisation of especially poor Black children (Ndimande 2016). It is not uncommon to find embarrassing affluence in school education facilities co-existing with that of destitution and squalor within a radius of five kilometres. Freedom of choice, while at face value, appears to be a noble aspiration and value, simply meaning that post-apartheid South Africa’s liberation of choice of *domicilium* (and school) has rendered a highly unequal schooling system based on the market principle of price formation through supply and demand for school education packages. The less overt and insidious manifestation is the master narrative at work regarding the centralised (State) engineering and over-specification of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices (the specifics of which are presented later in this chapter).

### **3 A Brief Analysis of the Genesis of Contemporary Education Systems**

As a point of entry and as a point of first ‘disruption’ it is important to reflect on the genesis of what contemporary society has taken to be the normative

model for education across the world. That the blueprint for the education systems of nation states closely resemble each other is not by accident (Mignolo 2011). In fact, its pervasiveness can be attributed to the powerful role that colonisation and modernity have played in organising the world of teaching and learning. This epistemological and ontological canon have continued to vociferously shape the nature of knowing, knowledge, and the knower (Mignolo 2011). The spread of modernity's epistemological tenets to every corner of the world over centuries is ascribable to the wave of colonisation that commenced with Columbus' 'discovery' of the Americas and Europe's rampant colonisation of various parts of the world. Modernity's stranglehold on ways of thinking, knowing and being has relentlessly endured. Note that the western Eurocentric canon did not establish itself in a vacuum (Grosfoguel 2013). In the colonies of the world, it fuelled a systemic epistemicide, (De Sousa Santos, 2016). Paradoxically though, modernity continues to thrive alongside Christianity and other belief systems. Of significance is that the modernity-coloniality-capitalist complex has produced two telling outcomes.

*Firstly*, it systematically fashioned a 'human resource' training system, namely, the contemporary school and university system. There are today taken-for-granted principles of modern schooling that translate unquestioningly into a gradation (K-12) system according to which children are ordered and separated by age in the first instance (5-6 years as entry level age to primary schooling) into age-based cohorts. Tuition is formal (usually whole class) and happens within confined physical structures (school and university classrooms). Progression from one grade to the next depends on the acquisition of a set of predetermine outcomes (usually stipulated in countries' qualification frameworks). Knowledge is 'carefully' selected, compartmentalised, and sequenced, and it is only upon demonstration of stipulated competence levels that children are permitted to proceed to the next grade – a necessarily accretive lock-step movement through the knowledge ranks. A tightly defined competence set also determines who might serve as dispenser and assessor (teacher) of selected knowledge packages for each grade. While this discussion might appear mundane and the issues presented are assumed to be axiomatic (generally accepted/acceptable), therein lies the problem; namely, the uncontested nature and structure of the modern schooling system. It has become clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has begun to pose a genuine threat to the education system's feasibility in its current form. Arguably the most

compelling mitigating impediment to the re-opening of schools and universities is the danger that close proximity presents for the spread of the contagion, an issue that is discussed below.

The *second*, is that the modernity-coloniality-capitalist complex in South Africa, has created a two-tier socio-economic system, a first and second economy that supports affluence in the former, and poverty in the latter. While schooling is ‘free’ and mandatory for all learners up to the age of sixteen (South African Schools Act of 1996), the neoliberal market model for schooling, in particular, has created stark differentiation in the curriculum ‘packages’ that the rich and poor are able to access (Ndimande 2016). Note that Tikly cautions about simply focusing on education alone, outside of substantive attention to how poverty is implicated in the paralysis that the South African poor often struggle in vain to break free of (Tikly 2013). Spauld confirms that South Africa has a dualistic system, a condition where formerly white schools have maintained a high level of functionality, while schools that historically serviced Black communities remain largely dysfunctional (Spauld 2013). Importantly, he notes that there is a distinct correlation between education and wealth in what he describes as a bifurcated education system. This adds credence to the argument that an essentialist fixation with an education-alone social justice intervention without due consideration of the material conditions within which poor children live in SA, is likely to be somewhat limiting. This particular realisation has come to the fore during the current pandemic.

#### **4 About ‘Intimate’ Proximity in the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Enterprise**

The pandemic has shown that close proximity exposes subjects to risk of contamination and community spread (Mboera *et al.* 2020). As mentioned above, the physical classroom with ‘intimately’ seated learners in close physical contact and a teacher who is also in close physical propinquity in a confined (walled) room, is the typical architecture for classrooms across the world. This construction of the physical teaching and learning space is proving to be uninhabitable, and is likely to exacerbate the spread of the virus. Disciplined ‘social distancing’ (maintaining the minimum two-meter proximity rule) has proven to be challenging for many people. It is not unusual to expect that young (and older) school children may take some time to learn this new life-preserving discipline. COVID-19 contraction has proven to have

life-threatening consequences (Shammi, Bodrud-Doza, Towfiqul Islam, & Rahman 2020). The notion of ‘life-threatening’ has particular salience and warrants our most acute and concentrated focus and attention. In the crudest and most candid terms, it reminds us that a person (a learner or teacher in this instance) may die within a short 14-day period of contracting the virus (Clark *et al.* 2020). Conventional teaching in conventionally structured school classrooms even in affluent schools with small class sizes is thus likely to be no longer viable as historically conceived.

The notion of ‘social distancing’, generally understood to be that of maintaining a physical distance between oneself and another person in a social space (Oosterhoff, Palmer, Wilson & Shook 2020) might well take on literal connotations. and may have long-lasting psychosocial consequences (Fitzgerald, Nunn & Isaacs 2020). This, then, raises the question as to how school teachers help learners negotiate the distinction between the physical spatial separation and the crucial need for social interaction. That social distancing might have implications for the mental and social health of school learners is a real issue as young people are likely to have varying proclivities for tactility (Oosterhoff *et al.* 2020), an issue that even school teachers are likely to struggle with. Anxiety and depression among young adults is likely to intensify amongst young people (Liu, Zhang, Wong, Hyun & Hahm 2020). COVID-19 will thus place enormous responsibility on school teachers to literally ‘teach’ their learners how to improve their chances of not contracting the virus. Teacher education programmes generally include somewhat watered down versions of psychology in Psychology of Education courses. As such, they are not likely to have adequately prepared current incumbents with sophisticated skills for dealing with widespread anxiety, depression. and trauma that children may experience from the outcomes of COVID-19 including that of quarantined hospitalisation of kin and even death. While there are no quick-fixes for bringing the current cohort of teachers up to speed, it does present as an area of competence that teacher education providers (both in-service and pre-service) could well expend some intellectual deliberation.

## **5 Neoliberal Assessment Regimes Now in Sharp Purview**

High-stakes testing, such as the South African Senior Certificate Examination (matriculation) has become an entrenched and ‘valued’ feature of the South African education system, yet little attention is paid to the ideological drivers

of such a testing regime. Measurement focused assessment, class tests and examinations are the distinct features of the South African assessment regime for school learners (Kanjee & Sayed 2013). Lingard asserts that accountability and surveillance functions of assessment are infused with neoliberal performativity imperatives (Lingard 2010). In fact, neoliberal economic imperatives continue to fashion education policy globally (Harvey 2007; 2010; Nussbaum 2010; 2011) with its genesis largely attributed to regimes of the Reagan (US) and Thatcher (UK) era. This era marked the infusion of neoliberal performativity discourses in educational discourses (Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark & Warne 2002), that have become somewhat naturalised in education systems across the world. Performative knowledge, pedagogical and assessment protocols have also become a distinctive feature of South African education. The public (including the academic public) has come to view assessment as a societal necessity, but seldom question its core ideological foundations and its profound relation to what masquerades as the noble ***purpose*** of education (namely to serve the productive needs of a neoliberally structured the economy) (Nussbaum 2010). Education for economic growth (that is ‘hoped’ will trickle down to all) is the doctrine that the neoliberal political and educational bureaucratic elite proffer at the expense of an education that is not narrowly driven by the broader profit incentive (Nussbaum 2010). School and university curriculum construction and assessment has become performance based. The capitalist market predetermines educational policy in the form of policy that prescribes utility-tailored knowledge and the concomitant assessment regimes to measure its demonstration. In other words, the market sets the standard. Student test results begin a chain of events, or occurrences. For both schools and students, this could either mean rewards or punishment for under-performance. Mathison notes that ‘(t)he assumption is that the threat of failure will motivate students to learn more, teachers to teach better, educational institutions to be better...’ (Mathison 2008: 533). It has become clear that nations have unwittingly fallen prey to the neoliberal master narrative (Harvey 2007; Nussbaum 2010; 2011).

There is much critique of assessment in its current form that South African education has largely ignored. Measurement of student and teacher performance through laborious testing regimes systematically dehumanises learners; reducing them from human being to number, and compromises deep relationship building between teachers and learners (Barret 2009). Teachers are compelled to assess what is overtly observable and objectively

‘measurable’. This comes at the expense of developing substantive social connections between teachers and learners in a learning enterprise that is not preoccupied with constant measurement (Day, Flores & Viana 2007; Valli & Buese 2007) and between fellow teachers (Gu & Day 2007). There is evidence that competitiveness fueled by a neoliberal incentivised self-interest is likely to render relations among teachers rancid, thus discouraging healthy collaborative relations amongst teachers for the holistic advancement of learners (Jeffrey 2002). The need to perform and sustain performance is felt by both teachers and learners (LaBoskey 2006). Teachers become distinctly more strict and demanding, developing dispositions that are likely to compromise teaching and learning (Elstad 2009). While there is limited research on how this has changed teacher attitudes in the South African context, early studies elsewhere indicate that alarmingly, the notion of care has regressed to caring about learner performance instead of the human learner (Jeffrey 2002). As can be expected, learners begin to question the bona fides of teachers and are likely to become scornful of teachers motivations and real intentions of their efforts (Laskey 2005). There is also early evidence of reductive teaching that is focused on developing learner competences for test success, the development of a narrow competence set that might have limited application to broader everyday life issues (Grant 2000). Test reliability and validity principles are likely to be compromised, as measurement becomes premised on what is easier to measure rather than an authentic assessment of learning (Lingard, 2010). As can be expected, learners’ individual development needs are substituted with skills for test success (Wong 2008). It also becomes clear that over-regulated assessment regimes and incessant testing demands that teachers allocate considerable working hours to the project of learner assessment, making teaching subservient to the assessment master (Valli & Buese 2007).

Note that test reliability, validity, authenticity, and test result credibility have become particularly salient in the current pandemic context. Summative assessment (of a predominant written nature), usually administered in confined spaces and within temporal limitations under strict surveillance, is proving to be a logistical and pragmatic nightmare for both schools and universities. There is much consternation about test-taker safety that might arise from prolonged multi-person presence even when prescribed/legislated proximity parameters are observed. The digital space also presents with formidable challenges, as experts grapple with strategies for authenticating bona fide, officially registered test-takers. Note that the need for test taker



surveillance is a profound indication of society's complete absence of faith in the human subject to have integrity and conduct herself honestly as she presents what she knows. This is indeed an indictment on our collective socialisation and warrants an analysis of what drives/motivates dishonest test-taking practices. It might well be related to neoliberalism's focus on individual self-interest in a punishing, competitive market environment. There is also the issue of the wide dispersion of university students in places of residence (homes) across the country. There is much trepidation and angst about access to digital platforms using the internet and mobile phones, both in terms of physical access, and the cost this might have especially for the indigent.

As stated above, these debates are not neither new nor peculiar to the South African education context. They should, however, re-alert us to what we have been socialised into, and how we have become so accepting of contemporary assessment regimes in South African schools. The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a thinking anew.

## **6 In Search of Inspiration: Border Thinking and Epistemic Delinking**

Gloria Anzaldúa's work entitled *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Anzaldúa 1987) is credited with inspiring the development of border thinking as theoretical and conceptual heuristic. Border think is intimately connected to decolonial scholarship, scholarship that critiques the hegemony that coloniality/modernity has on who, how, where and what knowledge is produced and valued (how modernity/coloniality has shaped the global education system was explained above). Despite the modernity-coloniality-neoliberal capitalist complex presenting as formidable 'foe', border thinking invites and affirms alternative perspectives on knowledge production. Border thinking is thus a considered response to modernity. The borderland is both the physical border and the metaphorical border. The physical border, the physical flashpoint in, for example, dual economies like South Africa, is where the second economy 'grates' against the first, haemorrhaging after each abrasive encounter (Anzaldúa 1987: 1). This was and is evidenced by weekly service delivery protests that saw citizens appealing for basic human necessities (safe homes, food, and water). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the appalling reality that, to date, over three thousand South African schools are not serviced with potable running water, and that an unspecified number of

schools still employ a pit latrine system. State inertia and lack of political will are not unreasonable arguments that might explain why this social atrocity persists. That the lack of running water will expose the poor to the vagaries of the pandemic is certainly not an argument that will draw contestation. It does beg the question, though, as to how such school communities (teachers and learners and other personnel) will experience the return to school programme that has recently commenced. What necessary intellectual conversations and social justice inspired educational research does the pandemic subpoena at this time of existential crisis? There is a compelling motivation for researchers and critical researchers in particular to leverage the ‘publicity’ that COVID-19 has provided as it relates to the education of the poor.

In embracing the metaphorical border as the nexus of praxis where experience, practice, and theory are mutually constitutive, thinking at this border would entail a plurality of stance; that is, a standing inside, outside and at the border to ascertain knowledge of and for an epistemic delinking from the modernity/coloniality canon. Epistemic delinking is about disruption and illumination, it ‘is about making visible the invisible and about analyzing [sic] the mechanisms that produce such invisibility or distorted visibility...’ (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 262). We thus have to make visible the socio-economic prejudice that the modernity-coloniality-complex has fabricated with a view to mounting a challenge to its hegemony. It becomes clear, then, that epistemic delinking from modernity and neoliberal capitalism will not be a paramount objective of the nation state (like South Africa). The political and bureaucratic elite sustain the shape and form that the education and health sector in South Africa has taken. The pandemic, however, has made overt the deep fissures that exist in the various spheres of South African society, bringing to the surface the misery of the disenfranchised. It also lubricates the machinery for border thinking activism. For educational researchers, practitioners and managers, this might mean summoning a critical meta-awareness of how curriculum, pedagogy, assessment practices and systems of educational governance have become normative, with the view to disrupting and troubling as they search for situated knowledges (Mignolo 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic has presented an ‘opportunity’ to challenge the extent of the curriculum and deliberate on schools’ abilities to effectively complete the curriculum in the amended academic year. Naidoo has cautioned, even prior to the national lockdown and closure of schools, that the extent of the existing curriculum has resulted in counter-productive curriculum pacing regimes in

South Africa in which teachers across the country are compelled to teach (cover curriculum content) at the prescribed rate irrespective of whether learners have acquired such ‘taught’ knowledge (Naidoo 2019).

With regard the deep subtext of the taught curriculum, the jury is out, though, as to whether teachers, school curriculum advisors and policy makers have the appetite for deeper epistemological questions as these relate to origins and ideological persuasions of contemporary South African school curriculum content. In essence, while border thinking and epistemic delinking in a time of enormous upheaval and trauma has much potential for helping to think anew, it does, however, also raise the question as to the education bureaucracy’s political will and teachers’ current state of emotional readiness to contemplate fundamental changes to current curriculum and assessment regimes.

## **7 Some Concluding Comments**

In scripting this piece, I am acutely sensitive to the deafening silence in this analysis and discussion of how gender is implicated in the time of this pandemic and how it remains a key domain of the colonial matrix of power. The theoretical insights of Lugones (Lugones 2007) and Anzaldúa (Anzaldúa 1987) would certainly add a further layer of analytical complexity; a project that is necessary, but beyond the scope of this current paper.

The lethality of the COVID-19 pandemic for the poor and disenfranchised has awakened our consciousness as to what South African society has taken to be normative as this relates to the pace at which socio-economic disparities ought to be confronted and addressed. That South Africa ought to have embraced a welfare state social and economic policy two decades ago instead of waiting for the current calamity is a moot point. The state’s response might well be regarded as a conscience appeasing ‘noblesse oblige’ typified by acute sensitivity to socio-economic prejudices, but (unashamedly), only when morally ‘cornered’ to address such prejudice. Note that neoliberals would certainly argue that it would not have been sustainable and would have compromised economic growth and wealth accumulation. As discussed above, neoliberal economic policies have, in fact, exacerbated the plight of the poor. Neoliberal policies, as these relate to the neoliberal influence on the form and shape of curriculum, assessment and governance (both in South African schools and universities) have proceeded unchecked, as these systematically reduce education to serving the vagaries of the market. It has wilfully abetted

social exclusionary practices, with economic capital becoming the powerful arbiter of the quality of education and health care that human subjects might leverage. The pandemic alerts us to how the conditions of prejudice in all its manifestations have been allowed to persist.

The critical contemplative stance that I advocate for in this chapter is one that understands education as complex, as process with outcomes that may confound, astound, and even disappoint, that warrants looking at curriculum and assessment with fresh eyes. I contend that we should 'prepare' subjects for life in a society that is characterised by a state of perennial dissonance. This might refer to a condition that recognises that socio-economic prejudice in all its manifestations may continue to exist and even strengthen both locally and internationally; one that neoliberal capitalism as well as neoliberalism's influence and reach (Bond 2014) into the field of education in particular (Shore 2010) is likely to intensify. As such, it demands a particular kind of activism.

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