Done First, and Done Properly: The Importance of Basic Education in the Decolonization of Higher Education

Dr. Megan Forster
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0580-4022

Prof. Dion A. Forster
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7292-6203

Abstract

The decolonization of Higher Education in South Africa is both important and necessary. This article argues that this process should begin at the level of Basic Education. Inattention to the curricula and the social environment of learners at basic education level impacts persons that move through primary and secondary schools towards higher education. The 2015-2017 #Feesmustfall and #Rhodesmustfall movements centred the cause for the decolonization of South African Higher Education. These students are themselves products of an education system that invalidated their worlds of knowledge. Since higher education debates are often politicised, the views, contributions, and inputs of persons with political agency (educators, policy makers, students) are often prioritised over those of persons with less agency (basic education learners and young parents). We argue that the decolonization of higher education is intrinsically related to the decolonization of the earlier phases of the education system.

Keywords: Basic Education, Higher Education, decolonization, Africanization, South Africa

Print ISSN 1023-1757; Electronic ISSN: 2519-5476; DOI https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2023/sp41a18

Introduction

Recent emphases upon the decolonization of Higher Education in South Africa are the focus of a great deal of research and debate. In this article we will focus our attention on an aspect of this debate that has not received sufficient attention and scrutiny to date. Namely, the relationship between basic education, and higher education, as this relationship relates to the decolonization of higher education. What role does the basic education system play in the decolonization of higher education as learners move through basic education 'toward' higher education?

Power Relations between Higher Education and Basic Education Policy

It is important that we consider, while there is an urgent need for change in higher education, we cannot neglect the structures and systems that precede developments in higher education. It is essential that we provide contextual, equal, quality basic education for all learners regardless of their social origin or social context. Ultimately, learners who progress through the basic education system will be both the informers of, and beneficiaries of, wide ranging initiatives to decolonize the South African education system. Whilst significant work has been done to improve the quality and equality of access in basic education, there has not been an equitable focus on the decolonization of the basic education phase. This is in comparison to what is being doing in the higher education space.

The South African 'White Paper for Post School Education and Training' states that, 'education should contribute to developing thinking citizens who can function effectively, creatively, and ethically as part of a democratic society. They should have an understanding of their society, and be able to participate fully in its political, social and cultural life' (Department of Higher Education and Training 2013). If we are to contribute towards the formation of thinking citizens who are able to participate fully in the formation of a just and equitable democracy, then we need to ensure that the education that we provide is contextually relevant and culturally appropriate to both the needs of the learners and the challenges and opportunities of the society in which they live. Such education should enable learners 'to look, to listen, to think, to feel, to imagine, to believe, to understand, to choose and to wish', and by these means to work for holistic flou-

rishing (Waghid 2003: 10). It is entirely reasonable to argue that it is both unwise and problematic to wait until learners enter the higher education space to begin with such a focus. This work should be central to learning throughout the educational journey. It requires a critical awareness of inherent social inequalities related to race, gender, economic class, age, and numerous other intersectional realities that impact upon education (Forster 2022: 106).

It is with this in mind that Rolando Vázquez's (2015) raises an important question about power relations in society. He asks, 'what does it mean to become a "global citizen" in such a divided world?' Stated differently, what might it mean to participate as a citizen in a world that is run through with inherent inequalities of power? Colonization sought to exploit unequal power relations by privileging those who had power within social systems (whether through cultural dominance, economic might, military might, or political prominence). The colonial principle of silencing and disregarding those with less power in social systems is pertinent to the current discussion on the relationship between basic education and higher education. Children, and the parents of young children (who are often less economically prosperous, less politically prominent, and with less margin for social participation) are easily forgotten, or deliberately disregarded by those who have greater resources, more power, and are more politically connected. Years of colonization have resulted in various intersectional inequalities in the South African education system. They are expressed as forms of social injustice.

In navigating the discourse of decolonization and the Africanization of higher education, change is essential if we are to have any hope of creating 'global citizens' from Africa who value their self-worth, can appreciate the value of their histories, while recognizing that their diversity is a social asset. We cannot move forward without some critical self-reflection and recognition of how privilege is constructed within the educational policy landscape. Those who conduct research often operate within, or in close relationship to, higher education institutions. As a result, many contributions to discourses of decolonization are shaped in by the concerns and priorities of higher education stakeholders. Despite the lengthy debates focused on decolonizing and Africanizing the higher education sector, the current basic education system continues to perpetuate the historical divides of South African society. This is no longer a politically enfranchised racial divide, it is now much more subtle, since it operates at the intersections of race, gender, class,

and age. The legacy of apartheid education has resulted in high levels of education inequality which has a direct impact on mobility and access to higher education for South African learners (Forster 2022: 5 – 11, 53 – 55, 80 – 83, 118 – 120). Many learners are caught in the poverty cycle because of current education policies, development issues, and implementation that dismisses, rather than embraces, the richness of South African diversity. Accordingly, educational policy has often excluded or neglected the perspectives and needs of young learners and their advocates.

Young Learners and Educational Transformation

It would be a mistake to ignore the injustices experienced at the basic education level as we consider what decolonization of higher education might entail. Developing South African learners with an intrinsic sense of self-worth, who can constructively engage in, and celebrate, the richness of their histories (even in the midst of struggle), should begin at the earliest possible stages of learning. The acknowledgement that each learners' cultural capital in the learning process is valuable and important, signifies a foundation that can be carried forward from basic education to higher education, and beyond. Van der Berg and Hofmeyr (2018:5) argue that 'there is strong agreement across disciplines that early development of children is both cost effective and inequality reducing'. This foundational investment bears dividends throughout the educational journey and beyond.

Moreover, Ndille (2018:4) states that 'what is generally deciphered from the conceptualization of education is that, worthwhile education should grow out of the environment, and the learning process should be directly related to the pattern of life in the society concerned'. He continues that, 'education is expected to initiate each individual into the general culture of his or her community and ensure that the transmission of the culture is sustained' (Ndille 2018: 4). For a variety of complex political, economic, and social reasons, our current education systems are structured in such a way that they deal with learners as if they were all the same, irrespective of their unique histories and contexts. Certain communities have a clear educational advantage over others (by virtue of the ongoing consequences of apartheid and colonialism). Yet, we set the same targets for everyone, and measure all learners with the same criteria irrespective of their history, their social positions, or their (dis)advantage. It is important that we do not collapse this

complex reality into advocating either entirely for sameness or difference. It takes courage to live with the tension between sameness and difference. Policy makers often collapse into pragmatic sameness, to make complex systems work. While practitioners and community members face the inadequacies of these systems as they encounter the daily realities of difference. There is a need to acknowledge, and honestly face, the complex social realities within which we operate and consider the possibilities and challenges of maintaining, or changing, our current basic education policies. To understand the effect of the present approach of treating all learners as if they are identical, we shall reflect upon the impacts of decolonization on basic education in the section that follows.

The Violence of Colonization, and Student Dissatisfaction with Contemporary Education Systems

In order to engage with the discourses of decolonization, it is important to consider some aspects and characteristics of how this concept is understood and used in this article. At first glance, new scholars to this subject in South Africa could be forgiven for linking decolonization to the sudden student uprisings that began in 2015 around the #RhodesMustFall and #Feesmustfall movements. However, the notion of decolonization is not an entirely new phenomenon in the South African educational arena. It has been a point of discussion since the early 1950's. In addition, it is also not a discourse that is unique to South Africa. A decolonial impetus emerged on the continent in the 1950's as colonial powers began to withdraw and indigenous leadership rose to prominence. Critical engagement with decolonial thinking was undertaken by a number of notable public intellectuals and community leaders who were opposed to the 'reformation of modern colonialism and imperialism within the capitalist-communist power struggle' (Baker 2012: 3).

The experience of African political decolonization during the Cold War, along with the publication of seminal decolonial texts by 1960s, led to the realization that decolonization had to include the assessment of modern western systems of knowledge and understanding (Baker 2012: 4). The question one could ask is, how after over 60 years of researching and discussing decolonization so little seems to have changed in this regard in South Africa? Why in 2024 are we still moving 'towards' decoloniality and Africanization? Shouldn't we be well into the implementation of decolonial,

Africanized, education in South Africa? Of course, there have been some changes, yet the frustration of students in the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements serves as an important indicator that there is ongoing discontent with an education system that has historically been geared towards the maintenance of social and economic inequality and the disenfranchisement of certain communities. In addition to this, their frustration shows that they are dissatisfied with an education system that largely disregards their social identities, social contexts, and the 'worlds' of knowledge that structure their identities, ideals and aspirations. It seems fitting that in his address to the students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016), pays tribute to the students who have, against all odds, successfully brought back into the public agenda the incomplete struggle for decolonization of education.

De Oliveira *et al.* (2015:22) suggest that 'decolonization is a messy, dynamic, and contradictory process'. Not only because colonization violently impacts every dimension of life, 'but also because decolonization has multiple meanings, and the desires and investments that animate it are diverse, contested, and at times, at odds with one another' (de Oliveira *et al.* 2015: 22).

In coming to understand the complexity of colonization and decolonization, in relation to Vázquez's (2015) claim that there is a need for self-reflection, one has to recognize the advantages gained by one community of persons, at the expense of others. As we reflect upon history from our current vantage point, it seems unthinkable that there was a time when secondary education was non-existent for black African pupils. Yet, it was only in 1929 that the first departmental (government) subsidy was paid to St. Peter's college in Rosettenville (then in the Transvaal province), which was the first black secondary school in the Transvaal (Hartshorne 1992: 61). It was not until 'the 1930's that the route to post-primary education for the great majority of black pupils was combined, through teacher training, with private study leading to Junior or Secondary Certificates'. He notes that there were so few black South African citizens with matriculation qualifications, 'that when the University College of Fort Hare was opened in 1916 it was found necessary to institute a matriculation class at the college to provide students for the degree course' (Hartshorne 1992: 62). The education policies of the colonial and apartheid regimes clearly did not want to prepare all South Africans to develop as active global citizens, since these policies deliberately

excluded so many from the right to education. This was in the period leading up to, and including, political apartheid in South Africa. However, is this not an ongoing existential reality for the majority of South African children? While political apartheid may have ended in 1994, the entrenched elements of structural discrimination, akin to colonial and apartheid laws, still operate in South African educational policies and are a daily reality for a large proportion of our population.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016) reminds the reader, that learners during the colonial and apartheid periods were barred from receiving an education that recognized students as human beings (i.e., it denied their dignity as human persons). They, and many contemporary students, were born into a system that did not serve their humanity or contribute towards their flourishing. The system was structured to work against their 'humanness' and their potential to flourish. Indeed, the apartheid education system invalidated the 'humanness' of Black and so-called 'coloured' learners. Colonialist and Apartheid era education were a 'total relation of power'. These systems were complicit in the construction of a society that is characterized by personal, structural, and existential injustice. As such the role of basic education must form part of the 'consideration how indigenous people lost their freedom to exist as indigenous people in almost every single sphere of existence' (de Oliveira *et al.* 2015: 24).

A Move towards Decolonization in Basic Education – Done First and Done Properly

Hartshorne (1992: 21) quotes Hugh Hawes (1990) as follows, 'If there is one master lesson that we have learnt from experience, it is that when you have big problems, and little time and money to solve them, something has to be done first and done properly'. Hartshorne, argues that 'in South Africa the primary education of black South Africans has neither been *done first*, in the sense of it having a clear priority, nor has it been *done properly* in terms of delivery, access, relevance and quality' (Hartshorne 1992: 22) (emphasis added). It is precisely for this reason that the debates on the developments in higher education towards being truly decolonial and African (the contested contents of which we shall not be able to consider here), cannot exclude what takes place in basic education. It would be fair to argue that in South Africa, education was used throughout our colonial and apartheid history as an

ideological means for indoctrination to ensure the suppression of black citizens (Forster 2022: 21 – 82). Black persons were exploited at the hands of colonial missionaries (at times knowingly, and at other times unknowingly). They designed and implemented curricula to deconstruct elements of identity, culture, history, and religion that disempowered persons and led to their social, political, and economic marginalization and the entrenchment of systems of oppression. The relevance of curricula remains a source of constant debate and a site of social and ideological struggle. Under apartheid rule, the deconstruction of black social identities and histories was joined to forms of schooling that reflected the needs of apartheid capital i.e., the need for a pool of unskilled and affordable labour to staff the mines and production industries, as well as the production of a disenfranchised labouring class to service white privilege in South Africa. This structural injustice was enfranchised in laws and educational policies under the apartheid regime (UCT Students 2016).

During his student address Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016) highlighted a quote from Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1992) book on decolonizing the mind, in which he identified the bigger problem confronting South Africans today. He distilled the long-term consequence of what he termed the colonial 'cultural bomb' that was detonated on Africa:

> The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their language, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance with other peoples' languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own spring of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of the struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair despondency and a collective death wish (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016).

The challenge therefore in the move towards the decolonizing of higher education must begin with, and include, decolonization at basic education

level, with a curricula that includes an educational system that recognizes that human learning and development takes place in social and cultural contexts. Young learners, at basic education level, must be allowed the opportunity to gain an understanding of the world and communicate with each other through the shared meanings of language and culture. This will go some way toward establishing the building blocks for learners to actively participate, throughout their educational journey, as persons with conscious ness and agency in their world and the wider world (Christie 2008: 59).

Towards Africanization and the Decolonization of Education

As highlighted above, decolonization as a discourse is not new. In the 1970s the notion of decolonization in Africa was considered to be synonymous with Africanization. As part of the post-colonial debate, Africanization is frequently described as 'a renewed focus on Africa', that 'entails salvaging what has been stripped from Africans and the African continent' (Letsekha 2013: 5). As with decolonization, there are different viewpoints on what Africanization means, or entails. There does seem to be general agreement that the notion of Africanization ultimately seeks to affirm African culture(s), African value systems, African traditions, and the nurturing of an African consciousness. In some instances there is also an attempt to find ways of 'blending western and African methodologies in education' (Letsekha 2013: 7).

There are of course also negatively framed views of Africanization. Some consider it to be an ideology masking what was fundamentally 'racketeering' or the predatory economic and political project that we call 'looting' today (Mbembe 2016: 30). More ominously, Fanon (1961) highlights that some forms of 'Africanization' could succumb to the pitfall of post-liberation 'retrogression'. Here retrogression entails not true liberation for the nation, but rather a new form of retrogressive subjugation under the power of a particular tribe or race i.e., as the 'nation is passed over for the race, the tribe is preferred to the state' (in Mbembe 2016). It is a process of narrow self-enrichment and empowerment that is not true liberation, but a retrogression from liberation into a new form of subjugation and abuse. Fanon regards this the process of Africanizing colonization. 'Retrogression' in relation to this negative form of Africanization, is the

foundation of such nationalist rhetoric, behind which 'lurks the hideous face of chauvinism, negrophobia and racism' (Mbembe 2016: 34).

However, in the constructive sense, calls for Africanization were made for the types of reform that would facilitate a return to certain forms of African indigenous identity, which were considered as a commitment to self-determination and human rights. These reforms were intended 'to restore a past mutilated and abused African cultural base, and aimed to serve as tools and values for the education of the future generations [of Africans]' (Ndille 2018: 3). Ndille suggests that after colonial independence there was a need for what Mignolo (2009) called 'dewesternisation', which many later African political leaders and political parties instituted as forms of Africanization; 'a call for the reorientation of education in favour of a locally based, contextualized, system' (Ndille 2018: 3). He reminds the reader that the colonial education system was one that included decision making by those who held the power to distort, displace, and make African communities believe they were less valuable or irrelevant (Ndille 2018: 4). However, across Africa, and this naturally includes South Africa, some have argued that the power to decide and act has now been handed back to Africans – in varying measures at least. As such we have a responsibility to ensure that learners moving from basic education to higher education are products of an education system that allows learners to develop a deep understanding of their own experiences, enabling them to develop the ability and desire to contribute from their own worlds of knowledge, which are no longer viewed as inferior.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016) argues that, Africanization forms a part of the process of transformation that aims at indigenizing inherited institutions. He links Africanization to the process of de-racialisation which would include making the universities African in form and content; the under-pinning of 'Affirmative Action', attempts to bring indigenous knowledge systems into universities, as does the addition of African scholars and African philosophies into the curriculum. Interestingly though, he also raises what he perceives to be problems with Africanization. He does so by posing a few questions. These include the suitability of the middle class as instruments in the process. He questions whether the middle class are the correct people to be changing the curriculum if they are all products of the same universities that are in need of change? He suggests that Africanization has been abused to enable looting and predatory tendencies. Moreover he

claims that at times opportunists have used notions of Africanization to hide chauvinism that manifests itself in the form of tribalism, racism, xenophobia, sexism and patriarchy (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni suggests that Africanization is not a mechanism to remove one system and replace it with another. Rather, one should be cautious of those who seek to 'villagise the university', saying that we should be mindful that actions motivated by revenge will not liberate us or our systems. In other words, he suggests that, 'we must not remove the universality of the university under the name of Africanization' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016).

In this regard Ngugi's (1992) approach to 'Africanization' suggests a 'project of re-centering', that seeks to reject, 'the assumption that the modern West is the central root of Africa's consciousness and cultural heritage' (Mbembe 2016: 35). By this he understands that Africanization is not only a responsive act done in relation to the West as a powerbroker of knowledge. He rejects the understanding that Africa is a mere extension of the West, acting along with it, or only reacting to it. Hence Africanization is 'not about closing the door to European or other traditions', rather it is, 'about defining clearly what the center is' (Mbembe 2016: 35). Re-centering, as it applies to 'Africanization', suggests that we are not rejecting and replacing the current system as if it has no value. Rather, we are recognizing that different perspectives exist, and that some perspectives (which have been disregarded), could have more appropriate value within our context. We have complex histories, therefore creating a pedagogy of positionality sets a platform where we can begin to dismantle a worldview, and work towards a transcending worldview that is more representative of who we are to ourselves, and who we are in relation to others. In this regard, Vásquez notes:

> The recognition of one's own positionality is a process of humbling that enables us to recognize that other positionalities are valid worlds of meaning in their contexts. It also means building the possibility of relationality rather than individuality and competition between the self and the other (Vázquez 2015: 99).

This debate is not only relevant to higher education, as if social identity and meaning are only created, or come to the fore, when a person reaches that level of education. It relates in a pertinent way to basic education. In fact, it

is even more important to approach processes of Africanization at basic education level with nuance and critical care, since young children (who are traditionally the participants at basic education level) do not always have the same levels of social access and agency as young adults (who are more often participants in higher education). Children are vicariously represented in such processes by parents, teachers, policy makers, politicians, and economic actors. Hence, Africanization is not only a constructive consideration (i.e., how will a curriculum shape the lives and minds of young people?), it is also political consideration (i.e., what role will young persons play in the shaping of their own lives and identities within this changing social and political reality?)

Decolonization: Some Challenges Facing Basic Education

As South Africans we celebrate the diversity of our heritage and put on a united front for the world that often seems to celebrate our harmonious diversity through ambiguous phrases like 'the rainbow nation'. Yet, we know the reality is quite different. We have not found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Rather, we have retreated into identity politics, and a what Francis Fukuyama calls a 'politics of recognition' (Fukuyama 2018: 11 – 13). It is therefore not surprising that after all these years we still have an education system that struggles with the shift from colonial domination to a decolonial system that appreciates and celebrates our African identity. What are some of the barriers that have contributed towards this reality?

Language Barriers for Learning that Impact Mobility and Access to Higher Education

During a workshop by UCT students in February 2016 related to #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, the issue of the language in which learning and teaching takes place remained a point of discussion at Higher Education level. The participants argued that:

> The domination of Afrikaans and English continues today. An example of the duplicity of state policies regarding language in education is that matric exams are written in English, a language spoken by a minority of predominantly white people, justified by the

> prevalence of English in business (a legacy of colonialism). An exception is made for the other historically favoured language, Afrikaans, which is an option for matric exams and is still taught as the medium of instruction in many high schools (an opportunity denied to native speakers of other languages) (Chikte *et al.* 2016: 5).

One could ask why such an emphasis is placed on language? Of course, the answer is that it is about more than just the language learning and teaching. Hartshorne paints a vivid picture of why the notion of language evokes such emotion within the educational (and social) framework. He reminds us that language is one of, 'the distinguishing characteristic of the human being, it is at the heart of the culture of a people, it is what makes people see themselves as different, and it is related to issues of identity, position and power' (Hartshorne 1992: 186). When we deny learners the right to be educated in a language that distinguishes who they are as human beings, are we not also denying them the right to authentic active citizenship? Language is at the heart of who we are. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that,

> … in South Africa, the history of the use of language in African schooling has revolved around the relative positions and status of English, Afrikaans and the African languages, and been determined by the political and economic power of those using the various languages. During apartheid the decisions were never taken by those who use (black) African languages in their everyday life, and ironically, when decisions were taken in favour of those languages they were taken without reference to their users, and for purposes far removed from any that had broad community support. The decisions were taken 'for' and not 'by' those most closely involved (Hartshorne 1992: 188).

In other words, decisions were made for persons who speak indigenous African languages, but these decisions were not made by them. Rather, the decisions served to limit their social mobility and divide African communities in their articulation from basic education towards accessing higher education (Hartshorne 1992: 188).

After all these years, we still have a curriculum that dictates that the majority of learners in South African schools have to switch to a different

language of teaching and learning from their home language when they reach Grade 4. This means that for most South African learners, foundation phase learning, which includes the first 3 grades of primary school, is undertaken in the learners' mother tongue (home language). When learners reach intermediate phase, Grade 4 - 6, learners switch to either English or Afrikaans (van der Berg & Hofmeyr 2018: 21). Conversely, mother tongue (home language) learning at intermediate phase in historically white schools is a continuation of the language they learnt in during their foundation phase (i.e., English or Afrikaans). However, African, rural, or township, schools are not afforded the same advantage, since the policy stipulates that from intermediate phase, learning and the assessment of the learning outcomes, takes place in either English or Afrikaans. These two languages (English or Afrikaans) are an additional language for the majority of South African learners. So before becoming literate in their home language, these learners are forced to switch to learning in a second or third language. The real challenge with the current language policy is that, 'most children do not learn to read in an African language (or any language) by the end of Grade 3' (van der Berg & Hofmeyr 2018: 22). Hence, by the time they reach Grade 4, 'when learners should no longer be learning to read, but rather should have made the transition to reading in order to learn' which they are forced to do so in either Afrikaans or English. The result is that 'the majority of South African learners have not acquired even basic reading skills in either of these languages' (van der Berg & Hofmeyr 2018: 22)

The move to decoloniality therefore cannot ignore the vast amount of research that highlights the challenges that illiterate and innumerate learners from basic education will place on the higher education system. Moreover, one cannot ignore the cultural, social, and structural injustice that such a system places upon learners who do not have Afrikaans or English, the languages of apartheid and colonialism, as their first languages. One cannot ignore that the assessments that measure whether they have mastered these outcomes, are administered in English or Afrikaans. These languages are not the mother tongue for the majority of the learners completing these assessments. Added to this challenge is the pressure on schools to produce learners for tertiary institutions that meet the national skills development strategies that requires more learners who are able to enter into science and technology occupations. After almost 30 years of democracy, the quality of education that is provided by most South African schools is still of major

concern. There seems to be very little qualitative difference between current standards of education and that which shocked the nation in the 1993 'Statistics for Living Standards and Development' survey, which highlighted significant quality problems in South Africa's education system (Buller *et al.* 1995).

Hence, we argue that South Africa's Department of Basic Education (DBE) should urgently reconsider how it provides education to all South African citizens. Apartheid excluded Black South African citizens from quality educational provision (Letseka 2013). The evidence suggests that Black children remain excluded in the current system. Letseka (2013) raises a number of pertinent challenges facing basic education, that include the overcrowding of classrooms, a lack of resources, infrastructure challenges, unqualified teachers, etc. More than a decade ago the Human Rights Commission (2006) concluded that 'vulnerability, alienation and a lack of social cohesion characterizes many of the township and rural schools' (Letseka 2013: 485). For many, the South African Constitution is hailed as 'a model liberal democratic constitution', 'a constitution of classic liberalism', 'because it values human dignity and frames human rights at its heart'. Yet, the educational system perpetuates dysfunctions that make a mockery of these lofty constitutional values (Ndille 2018).

Resource Challenges Impacting Decoloniality at Basic Education Level

In addition to language challenges, the move towards decoloniality is faced with the challenge of limited resources, one of which is budgetary constraints. The latest budget cuts to basic education, particularly in light of emergency Covid-19 relief, reinforces that we have a problem that still remains large, and we have less time and a smaller budget with which to address it.

Minister Angie Motshegka (2018) reminded Parliament on 9 May 2018, during her 2018 Budget Vote Debate, that,

> … in 2015, UNESCO had adopted the global education agenda, Education 2030, which is part of the seventeen UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that make up the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development. SDG 4 in particular, calls for

> inclusive, quality, and equitable education, and lifelong opportunities for all. She stated that in reality we have repeatedly stated that the internal efficiency of the system, and quality basic education outcomes, can only be achieved through specific and deliberate interventions in the early Grades (Motshegka 2018).

The minister also reported that, 'the major causes of failure and drop-out rates towards the end of secondary schooling, are weak learning foundations' (Motshegka 2018). Hence, the department of basic education must continue to focus on improving the considered interventions in these foundational grades. The 'primary focus of the department is to improve the quality of learning and teaching as well as quality outcomes in the early Grades' (Motshegka 2018). We argue that the minister's speech therefore supports the understanding that if we do not address issues around basic education that are both ideological and structural in nature, then mobility and access to higher education will continue to be problematic. In addition, 'Equal Education' in their media statement on the Minster's speech, noted that, 'given our growing school-going age population, high inflation rates, and ambitious National Development Plan (NDP) goals, it is to be expected that spending on education must increase annually – especially until historic backlogs are remedied. However, the contrary is true' (see Anon 2018).

The way in which the infrastructure needs of schools are set is defined by the Government's 'National Norms and Standards for School Infrastructure' (see Motshekga 2009). The principles state that every school should have at least the basic standards of sanitation (such as clean water and toilets), access to sporting facilities, teaching and learning resources such as functional and well stocked libraries, access to the internet, functional laboratories, and of course adequate security for the safeguarding of both persons and material resources. Motshekga (2018) stated in her budget speech that 'the budget cuts, exacerbated by the fact that provincial education departments have since stopped allocating funds for infrastructure delivery, will make it difficult to conform to the norms and standards for school infrastructure. The current pressures on appropriate sanitation provisioning in our schools, will require innovative funding strategies, including generous contributions from the private sector and South Africans' (Minister Angie Motshekga: Basic Education Dept Budget Vote 2018/19 South African Government 2018).

One may ask what bearing this has on decoloniality and Africanization? Part of the problem is that the debates remain locked in higher level ideological concerns that address the needs and concerns of older (young adult) citizens who have some social presence, some political agency, and a voice. Yet, the most vulnerable, those who require the greatest measure of social protection and provision are neglected in these debates. The neglect is both structural and ideological in nature. What is clear is that debates on decolonization have become highly politicized. As such, political actors dominate not only what is discussed, but for whom research is conducted, and whose concerns are most important. One cannot help but wonder whether there are aspects of party political pandering to address the concerns of voting constituents (young adults) as a primary concern, while the more important, but less urgent, needs of young learners as basic education level are largely ignored? The slow attention to these issues at basic education level contributes to the frustration experienced by learners who have been promised quality equal (African!) education for all. If we are not able to provide the youngest of our learners with a safe place to learn, an appropriate curriculum that recognizes their social context and aspirations, then how do we instil in these young minds that education is the single most important aspect of responsible citizenship?

Conclusion

The push for decolonization of Higher Education is a relevant, important and necessary debate. This article has reminded the reader that whilst we may direct our attention towards higher education and the need to create access and mobility for learners, we cannot do it at the expense of basic education. The attention (or lack thereof) on curricula and the social environment of learners at basic education level impacts the young lives that move through our primary and secondary schools towards higher education. These young persons, and their physical, social, and cultural needs are just as important as those of students in the higher education sector. We should be mindful that the learners who formed the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements to decolonize higher education are products of an education system that invalidated their worlds of knowledge.

Moreover, this article sought to remind us that differences in ways of knowing and being are universal or world-wide, and education, if it claims

to be about learning and understanding the 'real' world, should not be constrained by one dominant cultural projection that delimits learning about ourselves and the world for violent instrumental global design (Baker 2012: 12).

Hence, we sound a call that in working toward decolonization in higher education, we should take care that as academics, we have not neglected our responsibility toward the youngest persons entering the system. It is our duty to make sure that the transition to higher education begins with the youngest of our learners. We need to ensure that we work harder so as to ensure that the move toward decolonization in basic education feeds into the process of decolonizing and Africanizing higher education. In so doing we can work towards creating access and mobility for all, regardless of the community into which they were born. We should create an education system that is seen as a system of equal opportunities, where all learners have agency, and can contribute towards shaping who they want to be.

References

Andreotti de Oliveira, V., S. Stein, C. Ahenakew & D. Hunt 2015. Mapping Interpretations of Decolonisation in the Context of Higher Education. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 4,1: 21 – 49.

Baker, M., 31 November 2012. *Decolonial Education: Meaning, Contexts, and Possibilities*. Interpreting, Researching & Transforming Colonial/ Imperial Legacies in Education. Seattle, Washington. http://www.academia.edu/3266939/Decolonial_Education_Meanings_Contexts_and_Possiblities

Buller, B., P. Pillay & N. Sirur 1995. *Literacy Trends in South Africa: Expanding Education while Reinforcing Unequal Achievement?* https://www.datafirst.uct.ac.za/dataportal/index.php/citations/810

Chikte, A., C. Hamukoma, G. Jombile, I. Bassier, S. Tilley, S. Mahomed, T. Phaweni & T. Mbewu 2016. *Why Neoclassical Arguments against Free Education are Bullshit: And Why we Need Free Education*. University of Cape Town. https://vula.uct.ac.za/access/content/group/fdf89eba-baa6-407c-ba96-3a3f959e6d29/Higher%20Education%20Crisis/Free%20Education%20Economics%20critique.pdf

Christie, P. 2008. *Opening the Doors of Learning: Changing Schools in South Africa.* 1st Edition. Johannesburg: Heinemann.

Department of Higher Education and Training 2013. *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training. Building an Expanded, Effective and Integrated Post-school System.* Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET. http://www.dhet.gov.za/SiteAssets/Latest%20News/White%20paper%20for%20post-school%20education%20and%20training.pdf

Forster, M. 2022. *Deliberative Democratic Theory in Relation to Private General and Further Education and Training.* PhD Thesis. Stellenbosch University.

Fukuyama, F. 2018. *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. London: MacMillan.

Hartshorne, K.B. 1992. *Crisis and Challenge: Black Education 1910 - 1990*. London & New York: Oxford University Press.

Letseka, M. 2013. The Illusion of Education in South Africa. *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences* 116: 4864 – 4869. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.1039

Letseka, T. 2013. Revisiting the Debate on the Africanisation of Higher Education: An Appeal for a Conceptual Shift. *The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning* 8: 5 – 18.

Mbembe, A.J. 2016. Decolonizing the University: New Directions. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15,1: 29 – 45. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022215618513

Motshekga, A. 09 May 2018/ 2019. *Minister Angie Motshekga: Basic Education Department Budget Vote 2018/19.* South African Government. https://www.gov.za/speeches/minister-angie-motshekga-basic-education-dept-budget-vote-201819-9-may-2018-0000

Ndille, R.N. 2018. *Educational Transformation in Post-Independence Africa: A Historical Assessment of the Africanization Project*. Preprints.org. https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints201808.0062.v1

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J. 06 October 2016. *Keynote Address: Decolonizing the University and the Problematic Grammars of Change in South Africa*. 5th Annual Students Conference on Decolonizing the Humanities and Social Sciences in South Africa/Africa, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

van der Berg, S. & H. Hofmeyr 2018. *An Incomplete Transition: Overcoming*

the Legacy of Exclusion in South Africa. World Bank Report No. 125838-ZA. World Bank Group.

Vázquez, R. 2015. Decolonial Practices of Learning. In *Going Glocal in Higher Education: The Theory, Teaching and Measurement of Global Citizenship.* Middelburg: De Drukkerij. http://www.ucr.nl/about-ucr/Faculty-and-Staff/Social-Science/Documents/GoingGlocal_DEF_02.pdf#page=94

Waghid, Y. 2003. *Education as Virtue: Cultivating Practical Reasoning and Compassion*. Stellenbosch; Stellenbosch University Publishers.

Wa Thiong'o, N. 1992. *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature.* Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.

Dr. Megan Forster
Faculty of Engineering
Stellenbosch University
meganforster@sun.ac.za

Prof. Dion A. Forster
Beyers Naudé Centre
Stellenbosch University, and
Vrije Universiteit
Amsterdam
d.a.forster@vu.nl