DIONISIO NYAGA

9. NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Praxis of Indigenous Peoples in Kenya

ABSTRACT

Kenya achieved its independence in 1963, after which the post-colonial government promised it would eliminate poverty and illiteracy. To date, this remains a mirage, even after the introduction of free primary education. This chapter interrogates the Kenyan school curriculum, particularly the space under which the curriculum is taught. Most students are not connecting with it because what is taught is mired in colonial thought processes. Consequently, teaching is perceived as alienating and foreign to both the students and educators. Teachers need to invoke Indigenous ways of knowing in order to decolonise themselves, the 'place' in which education is delivered, and curriculum.

Keywords: Curriculum, Indigenisation, Hybridity, decolonisation, colonisation

INTRODUCTION

Kenya secured independence from Britain in 1963, when the first president, Jomo Kenyatta promised to eradicate illiteracy. However, even after the introduction of free education in 2002 there have been major challenges, notably quality of education based on the number of children enrolled. The ratio between the teacher and student was overstretched and the government did not have sufficient resources to properly initiate the programme, coupled with a high dropout rate. In 2002, Kenya promulgated a new Constitution that was seen as a new beginning in terms of enshrinement of the rights and freedoms of Kenyans. Though it received positive responses both nationally and internationally there is still no renewal of the education system, with the curriculum remaining Eurocentric.

This chapter examines incorporation of other ways of knowing that allow transformation of the classroom and the curriculum in Kenyan schools. Teachers find themselves tied up with so many issues that hinder them from having time to critique and analyse their curriculum. Colonisation and neo-colonialism have placed enormous pressures on the Kenyan teacher. Among these pressures are the precariousness and amount of work they are expected to undertake, for instance the growth of temporally, part-time and seasonal teachings jobs. This has left teachers concerned for survival rather than quality of what they are delivering to the student,

N. Phasha et al. (Eds.), Inclusive Education in African Contexts, 139–149.
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with less choice but to uncritically undertake teaching. A solution would be a classroom in which some social bodies feel unrepresented in terms of teachable and 'place', of importance for any curriculum. According to Benabed (2009):

> "Place", then, should be understood as "space to which meaning has been ascribed" (Carter et al., xii); in other words, space becomes place when it acquires historical meaning. In places, not spaces, important events have occurred and are remembered across generations. For the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, place is not only perceived "through the eyes and mind", but also through "more passive and direct modes of experience". It is a point "in a spatial system", to which a person is attached with "strong visceral feelings" (152). Hence, the "sense of place" refers to the feeling evoked by a specific location. It can be negative, which Tuan calls "topophobia" (fear of place) or positive, which he calls "topophilia" (love of place). (p. 85)

This show that for teachers to connect with the students there is a need for a deconstruction of the place and the tool used to govern it. The Western curriculum has historically controlled the learning space, so to decolonize the place it is necessary to deconstruct the curriculum. This can happen through indigenising the teachable.

Indigenous knowledge production and integration in a school curriculum is a question of power (Dei, 1996). This chapter seeks to ask how Indigenous knowledge can transform a Eurocentric Kenyan school system and curriculum, with the author having been located within both the Eurocentric Kenyan curriculum and Canadian school system, in which he has been a student and educator. This will be followed by discussion of the history of school system in Kenya, exploring the colonial legacy within the school system. In order to transform a colonised curriculum it highlights the Indigenous perspectives as a way forward in the transformation of the school curriculum in Kenya.

LOCATING MYSELF

Born and raised in Kenya, I am a product of a Kenyan school system called '8-4-4', which entailed eight years of elementary school and four years of high school. I later migrated to Canada and took a social work degree over four years. As somebody who has experienced both worlds I believe this hybrid understanding and experience can help fill gaps present in the current Kenyan curriculum. Hybridity has power of transforming and dislocating taken-for-granted thoughts and ideas, and with its temporalities one is able to go between and beyond a sentence or story and identify possibilities. One is able to look at those sentences and thoughts as temporal and contingent such that they hold a gap that can be questioned and filled later in life (Bhabha, 1994). Being in Canada has allowed me to appreciate the importance of inclusive education and how that can necessitate better and holistic academic results for the student and community as a whole. As such, my experience as an educator and social worker in the Canadian context allows me to look at the current Kenyan

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curriculum from a more informed vantage point. In the Canadian school system students and teachers have a role to play in shaping the teachable, but there is intense marginalisation of students according to race. This is caused by many factors, such as the failure to connect with the curriculum, teachers and space, the latter being predominantly white. The curriculum is Eurocentric (Dei, 1996), so some students' failure to identify with the system has had serious consequences in terms of high drop-out rate of black students, culminating in the introduction of an Afrocentric school system. This experience resonates with the Kenyan school system, as examined in this chapter.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF KENYAN CURRICULUM

The current education system in Kenya of 8-4-4 means that a student has to undergo eight years of primary level, four at secondary level and four for the bachelor degree (Somerset, 2009). This system was introduced in 1985 with the aim of inculcating a holistic and well-rounded student, but though the plan was noble the system continues to face a myriad of problems. Focus is on reading rather than technical skill, with the aim of passing examinations (Buchmann, 1999) and on preparing for the market (Bagaka, 2010; Sang, Muthaa, & Mbugua, 2012; Ngware & Ndirangu, 2005). The system also fails to encourage students to specialise on particular areas of interest (Buchmann, 1999) and there is a need to look at marginalisation of some ways of knowing in the school system, among them African Indigenous ways of knowing and practice.

Before the 8-4-4 system was introduced, Kenya had a system called '7-4-2-3' (Buchmann, 1999; Otiende, Wamahiu, & Karugu, 1992; Somerset, 2009), in which a student had to undergo seven years of elementary schooling, then four of secondary education, two of 'A' levels and finally three of university education. This system was community based under the guise of *Harambee*, which translates as 'getting together' (Buchmann, 1999), adopted from the colonial system. As a way to decolonise the newly independent Kenyan in 1964, education stakeholders proposed that the school system accommodate cultural diversity in what was teachable (Otiende, Wamahiu, & Karugu, 1992). This was expected to decolonise the curriculum and as such 'Kenyanise' the school system (Buchmann, 1999; Somerset, 2009), and represent a rebirth of a curriculum that incorporated Kenyan views and touch.

The education stakeholders did not focus on how the structure could be revolutionised entirely using Indigenous ways of knowing, but rather there were piecemeal changes that maintained colonial fragments. It was what Kenyans would call 'colouring a donkey to look like a zebra'. Except for the introduction of mother-tongue language in the first three grades the rest were predominantly instructed in English (Wa Thiong'o, 1986). Each Kenyan dialect was allowed to be taught in the lower grades, but this had more to do with civic education and politics than deeper understanding of Indigenous perspectives (Buchmann, 1999). The system became

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more political than educational (Ngware & Ndirangu, 2005), showing up how a colonial government system worked in new submission to a post-colonial state

It was also assumed that Kiswahili as an Indigenous language could indigenise the curriculum but placed alongside English it could not stand the test of time (Odiemo, 2008). The system was structured in such a way that English was predominantly espoused and recognised, with schools encouraging young people to speak and write in English more than other languages. Those in upper level classes would be punished by their teachers if found speaking in their mother tongue, through passing of *munitu,* a term for 'monitor', meaning to govern and control. A horn from a cow would be tied to a string and in the morning the teacher would move around looking for students who were expressing themselves in their mother-tongue. The teacher would hang the *munitu* on the neck of the one who was thus publically shaming, punishing and disciplining to warn others of the consequence. This supposed way of accommodating other ways of knowing dehumanised the very language that they were supposed to enhance and those who wore the horn would be punished through caning or other means. As such, the student started feeling alienated from their schools and peers, leading to high dropout rates as they could not connect with a system that did not recognise who they were, whilst undermining their language and identity.

The curriculum continues to colonise the space in which students are expected to learn. The current curriculum fails to connect with students due to a failure to critique colonial liturgies present in most school curricula (Dei, 1990). The answer to this is critically evaluating, analysing and questioning its normalcy as well as self-reflecting the role of the educator in presenting a Western curriculum as a norm in the Kenyan school system. Is the educator ready to invoke other ways of teaching in their curriculum? Does the educator favour some ways of teaching while alienating other? Is the educator questioning the space and the curriculum that inform the class? These are major pedagogical questions that need to be asked within the academic system, but they can only be answered in an environment in which healing is possible through incorporation of other ways of knowing and practices. As such I propose employing Indigenous ways of knowing and practice within the curriculum to enhance critical thinking and a reconnection of the space with bodies within and without it.

The curriculum fails to connect either with the teacher or the student, with the former becoming alien to it because it dictates what they need to do (Sifuna, 1992). As such it denies the innovativeness and creativity of the educator (Wanja, 2002). The teacher become a means of inscribing colonial processes and thoughts to the students and so is alienated from the process and the product (Marx, 1964). On the other hand, the curriculum makes the teacher and the student become disconnected, because it is geared towards seeing the student as a product of its own and following its own agenda. The only connection between the learners and the educator is the governing power of the curriculum, which by looking at students as objects of introspection makes them fail to connect with the teacher and course (Sifuna, 1992). The teacher is an 'other' who represents the establishment.

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Most students cannot express themselves in their ethnic language whilst most parents support the idea that their children should be enlisted in Eurocentric academies, even encouraging them to speak in English (Mule, 1999). This is meant to enhance their chances of securing well-paid employment, in line with prosperity and the politics of respectability closely connected to Eurocentric culture and language (Mule, 1999). Annuik and Gillis (2012) write that "In Canada, Methodist clergyman Egerton Ryerson believed all children needed a common set of skills: English literacy and numeracy as a means to become citizens of Canada (Curtis, 1987, 1992, p. 65). Language and cultures have become tools for acquiring citizenship and recognition, seen as backward and heathen by those connected to colonisation and its place in the school system (Mule, 1999; Robbins & Dewar, 2011).

What we are encountering now is a scenario whereby teachers in such schools cannot work well with students, and there has been an outcry by teachers that today's students are disrespectful (Sorin, 2007). On the other side, students claim that their teachers do not understand the concept of inclusive teaching (McCabe, 2007), because the curriculum and colonial liturgies that inform schools cannot allow a connection between teacher and student. Asante (1998) writes that cultural underpinnings can also affect economic practices of any society.

The curriculum is top-down in such a way that there is the 'knower' and those who are supposed to consume the knowledge. This kind of expert-based kind of curriculum de-skills the teacher and does not recognise the experience of the student. The curriculum de-socialises the classroom, creating an antagonistic relationship between student and teacher as it has no place to allow unity of purpose between or exchange of ideas to enhance classroom theorising. It denies the place for reciprocal relationship whereby the teacher is allowed to guide and facilitate students in knowledge production. This kind of relationship is guided by respect between the co-creators of knowledge (student and teacher) rather than having a relationship based on power. With a Eurocentric curriculum, the teacher becomes more emotionally, spiritually and physically fatigued. Looking at the school system as an industrial complex, more so under a neoliberal regime, the teacher is constantly unprepared to counter colonial discourses that pervade today's school curriculum.

Most of these students cannot connect with who they are, because identity is informed by that which is not theirs. Such disconnection needs to be handled through infusing a decolonising process into the curriculum, so teachers identify who they are through genealogically excavating their histories and cultures. It is through this that other ways of knowing can flourish within the classroom and help critique Western colonial thought process in the curriculum. However, for this critical decolonisation to happen, teachers and students need to heal their spirit from colonial injury, because they constantly face colonial academic process in their everyday teaching experience. We are therefore seeing 'marinated' instructors who are out of reach with themselves and others. As Mazama (2002, p. 387) wrote,

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> … to use Afrocentric terminology again, we do not exist on our own terms but on borrowed, European ones. We are dislocated, and having lost sight of ourselves in the midst of European decadence and madness, it becomes increasingly difficult for us to orient our lives in a positive and constructive manner.

This affects the teacher and the student based on the way it punishes and disciplines the student and the teacher. As such, both look at each other as enemies rather than co-creators of knowledge. The curriculum is set in such a way that it divides to rule.

COLONIAL LEGACY AND STATE OF GOVERNMENTALITY IN KENYA'S SCHOOLS

Colonialism brought with it erasure of come cultural beliefs and cultures, identified by Wa Thiong'o (1986) as when the white man came to Kenya and told Indigenous peoples to close their eyes for prayers. Upon opening them their culture and wellbeing had been taken away. Some of the ways of colonisation was through education, by which young people and children became object of instruction in the school system. Today, colonial practices and ways of knowing continue to rule supreme in most educational curriculum (Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Odiemo, 2008). The Westminister educational structure is common in most learning spaces, including teacher training colleges, with colonial learning sentiments continuing to be passed on to students (Annuik & Gillis, 2012).

Having undergone elementary and high school teaching in Kenya, there are some practices that were averse and common in most learning institutions. In my school we were not supposed to speak in our mother tongue, there was a disciplinary mechanism set to curtail and monitor any student from expressing themselves in their local language, and the *munitu* was used. Fanon would call this wearing a white mask in a black skin.

KENYAN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE – THE WAY FORWARD

Against the above background, I propose that Indigenous ways of knowing can help deconstruct a Eurocentric curriculum and make it more accepting and inclusive. Indigenous ways of knowing allows for free flow of power by which everyone is expecting and is expected to help others under an environment of respect and love. As such, a curriculum laced with Eurocentric ideals brings more torment to teachers and consequently the students by making them look and behave like experts. It sets up standards that a teacher is supposed to meet. The space in which the curriculum is unravelled becomes a prison where everyone is under surveillance from each other and themselves. A teacher who seeks the help of students is seen as unprofessional, irrational, and undeserving. To that end, the curriculum becomes a tool to economise power within the classroom through putting students and teacher within separate

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social spheres in which they can be policed and police each other. This makes it easy for the establishment to enforce rules with little or no critical analysis.

Inclusive teaching allows reflexive ideas to flourish and recognises that students bring with them rich experiences that when combined with other knowing can enrich knowledge production. A classroom is a space in which everyone participates in knowledge production. Leaners and educators have a responsibility to add and critique expert and Eurocentric curriculum, free to bring their cultural beliefs and thoughts to the discussion. An inclusive classroom deconstructs the masculine, rational and colonial aura present in the classroom, helping it become a place for mutual learning and understanding. This widens up the scope of learning and makes students go beyond their cultural borders while enhancing pride in their own cultural backgrounds. It strengthens confidence and a sense of responsibility among students. Inclusive teaching allows for the liberation of the classroom by recognising identity and cultural politics, allowing others ways of knowing to enter it. This includes Indigenous practices and knowledges as part of the teachable.

This chapter therefore argues that we need to invoke Afrocentric Indigenous ideals into the curriculum so that it reflects the needs of the students. As with inclusive teaching and practice, Afrocentricity is a discourse that allows centring of other ways of knowing and practices within spaces of learning. The curriculum thus becomes a tool that is not constant but rather temporal and contingent. We need to look for ways through which the curriculum will allow Indigenous knowledge production and processes to find entry into the academic spaces. The stage would thus be set to identify how this Indigenous knowledge production can work to invoke re-orientation of the classroom as a space for healing, relationship creation, and reciprocity and respect as espoused through an Afrocentric Indigenous practice and knowledge production (Dei, 1996).

Most Indigenous communities have principles that define their everyday work and ways of understanding their environment, key among which are respect, reciprocity, relationship building, and reconciliation. These values define how communities and individuals connect. Kenyan Indigenous communities continue to use this ways of socialising to enhance their relationship and participation in the community. To make sense of values and how they feature in the society it is important to understand some cultural practices and spaces in which those practices are made real. For instance, among the Aembu people, environment was an essential resource for survival. Like most Indigenous communities, they had a place in which they would seek solace and help from supernatural powers, especially when the community was facing natural catastrophes (Karangi, 2008), but also when the community had a bountiful harvest. They would go to special oracles to give thanks to their creator, such as under a mountain. Many believed that a powerful spirit lived in the mountains (Karangi, 2008), and the closest they would come to the mountain was at its base, usually forested, where they would meet to undertake their prayers and seeks advice from the ancestors. Within this forested area there was only one tree under which all sacrifices, healing and other cultural rituals would be undertaken, a fig tree also called

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Mugumo (Karangi, 2008). The *Mugumo* tree continues to have immense political and educative purpose among the Aembu, and when young people undergo initiation they are invited to this space so that they can be taught the ways of life of Aembu people (Karangi, 2008). The assumption was that these young people were to take leadership in the future. As such, among the Embu community the *mugumo* tree is a classroom space in which youth would be taught different lesson on ways of life and their identity. When the youth were invited to meet an elder under the *mugumo*, it was expected of them to be respectful to the space and the elder (Karangi, 2008), but the same respect was supposed to feature in how the elders were teaching the youth. The elders were supposed to allow young people to speak their mind in an environment of love and respect, based on an assumption that the youth had a power to see how the future needed to be shaped. The elders were supposed to be comfortable with the ideas coming from the youths, a culture of reciprocity necessary for new forms of knowing to be fronted and allowed to flourish. They recognised that youth had new forms of knowing which could inform how the society needed to be. At the same time, the youth recognised the wisdom and experience of elders and how that would inform their thought. All this was conducted in an environment of respect as young and old would not only learn from each other but forge a mutual relationship.

However, as much as the tree acted as a place of instruction it also acted as one n which to infuse spirituality and healing to young people (Karangi, 2008). The youth would be invited for blessing by a traditional healer before the start of the 'class', and a shaman would be called with prayers to Mwenenyaga (Embu God) offered up. Spirituality was an important component of healing the spirit of the elders and the youth (Baskin, 2012; Campbell, 2012; McCabe, 2007; McKernan, 2007; Simon, 2002; Wanja, 2003), and through this process of healing by spirituality, youth and the elders would be psychologically, emotionally and physically prepared for what was to be learned (Mbunga, 2013; Wanja, 2003). It was a way to connect the learners to their ancestors. Through spiritual healing, an elder and the youth would be deemed connected to the living, non-living and the cosmos, thus restoring balance and interconnectedness necessary for learning (Baskin, 2012; Campbell, 2012; McCabe, 2007; Wanja, 2003).

There is a need to connect the contingencies and temporalities present within mainstream schools. The narrative present within the curriculum needs to be disturbed and interrupted, but this gives rise to its own challenges. Battiste, Annuik and Gillis (2009) write that "…this modern knowledge does not coexist in the classroom with the knowledge of how to achieve a decolonized education", the response to this criticism being that "all must become critical learners and healers in a wounded space". Part of this healing involves honouring and practicing Indigenous teachings that stimulate the heart as well as the brain to collaborate in education (Chilisa, 2012).

The classroom needs to become a holistic space meant not only to instil scholarship to the learners but also to heal their pains (Baskin, 2012; Burgess & Agozino, 2011; Dei, 2000; Smith, 1999; Torres, 2012). Annuik and Gillies (2012)

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write that "This learning with only half of the body—mentally and, occasionally, physically—impedes learners from achieving their full capacity and purpose" (p. 65), which calls for the indigenisation of the curriculum so that elders can be involved in decolonising the schools and the curriculum (Dei, 2000). There should be a way whereby the elders can be called to the university to perform spiritual healing for the social work students so that when they graduate they are ready to undertake what they have learnt (Kithinji, 2000; Torres, 2012). Spirituality allows healing of the body and the mind, helping open up a critical mind-set for both learner and teacher.

There should be a recognition that a hybrid way of practice within the classroom can enhance future practice (Chilisa, 2012; Stevenson, 2010), serving to re-connect the instructor to their own cultural identity (Dei, 2000). Failure to do this we will be perpetuating colonial academic liturgies in the curriculum that have failed to live up to expectation (Asante, 1983; Dei, 2000; Smith, 1999). Conversely, allowing other ways of knowing to flourish in the classroom will help in healing historical and generational traumas that teachers and student face. To that end, their practice will be enhanced and thus be able to offer quality service.

There is a need to look at the power imbalance that exists between the Indigenous peoples and the colonial classroom. Waldron (2010) writes that:

> …initiatives to nurture collaborations between Indigenous healers and Western practitioners are often fraught with challenges because the moral space in which psychiatry is located is characterized by a discourse that construes Indigenous healing as unprofessional and naive. Moreover, they argue that the professionalist discourse within which Western medicine and psychiatry are couched marginalizes and stigmatizes Indigenous healing as 'the other'. (p. 52)

Who should seek the other? Why should it be the Indigenous healer and elder going to the academic space? Can the converse be possible? As the warriors used to go to the *mugumo* tree to seek blessing and guidance from the elders and the ancestors, is it possible for students to go to the tree to seek the help of the elder? These questions will help unravel power dynamics that continue to exist between the formally colonised subjects and the coloniser (Dei, 2000).

Repeatedly, we have seen Indigenous ways of knowing and practices being commodified and co-opted by the colonial regimes in the process of conquering and profiteering (Asante, 1983; Lavallee, 2010; Smith, 1999; Yee & Wagner, 2013). It is possible that some educators and students in the academy will take up ways of Indigenous healing and use them for their own benefit. The past will continue to inform the future and we are living in an era when modification of Indigenous people's ways of being and living are being normalised. Institutions bent on profit-making have turned Indigenous people's practices and knowledge into a commodity that is ready for a market, under the pretence of modernising the Indigenous ways of knowing (Spero, 2012). I call for us to be cognisant that we are wiser this time, and power dynamics need to be recognised in going forward.

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CONCLUSION

In this time and era there is an urgent need for the inclusion of other ways of practices and knowing in classroom settings, to help in healing the past pains that teachers still feel. This will help to open new ways of understanding the curriculum, and consequently critiquing it. It will also help in making teaching more effective and efficient with a ripple effect from teachers to the student. Through this, the classroom can turn into a space in which mutual respect and relationships are core values that direct the classroom. This does not mean that such traumatic moments will not show up while teaching but should resolve the issue of how we infuse African Indigenous ways of knowing as a way of informing and decolonising the classroom and curriculum such that the educator and students feel a sense of ownership of the teachable.

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