

Decolonization of the African Education System: Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledge, Language, Curriculum, and Epistemic Agency

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Abstract

Colonial-era institutional, epistemological, linguistic, and curricular systems continue to have a major impact on the African education system. Despite the fact that political independence changed the governance of African governments, many educational institutions continued to replicate knowledge forms, curriculum, languages, assessment procedures, and pedagogical approaches created within colonial contexts. By concentrating on curriculum transformation, indigenous knowledge systems, African languages, teacher education, pedagogical reform, and locally grounded knowledge production, this study explores the necessity and potential of decolonizing African educational systems. The study summarizes research on colonialism, African education, indigenous epistemologies, and curricular transformation using a qualitative narrative literature review. The analysis shows that decolonization is more than just substituting African knowledge for European knowledge. Instead, it should develop an education system that is socially equitable, contextually relevant, intellectually diverse, and acknowledging African knowledge systems as valid sources of information. According to the study, in order to achieve true decolonization, African governments, academic institutions, schools, educators, communities, and researchers must reevaluate who creates knowledge, whose information is taught, which languages are given preference, and what the goals of education should be. It suggests a multifaceted framework that focuses on teacher preparation, community involvement, research transformation, curriculum reconstruction, multilingual education, integration of indigenous knowledge, and institutional reform. Therefore, decolonizing education can enhance African intellectual autonomy while equipping students to confidently confront local and global issues.

Keywords: Decolonization, African Education, Indigenous Knowledge, Curriculum Reform, African Languages, Epistemic Justice, Coloniality, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Every society's social, political, economic, and cultural progress revolves around education. Knowledge is passed down through generations, personal identities are shaped, skills are developed, and societies' perceptions of themselves and the outside world are influenced. However, education has traditionally served as more than just a means of learning throughout Africa. During the colonial era, European authorities used education as a key tool to try to change African cultures, institutions, identities, languages, and knowledge systems. As a result, the current discussion around the decolonization of African education goes beyond adding African authors to reading lists or altering textbooks. Deeper issues of power, knowledge, identity, language, pedagogy, and the goal of education are all involved.

Colonial educational systems did not necessarily completely change as most of Africa gained political freedom in the 20th century. Schools, universities, curriculum, examination systems, instructional languages, administrative structures, and teacher-training models that had evolved under colonial regimes were all inherited by postcolonial governments in several nations. Consequently, the pace of political and educational decolonisation has differed. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015), frameworks of knowledge, authority, and representation may continue to favor Eurocentric conceptions of the world, allowing coloniality to endure the official end of colonial control.

Curriculum content and knowledge generation are two areas where colonial educational frameworks continue to have an impact. The legacy of colonial education, particularly the marginalization of indigenous voices and knowledge systems, has persisted in postcolonial African school curricula, according to Shizha (2013). Similarly, recent studies on higher education in Africa show that global knowledge hierarchies and Eurocentric academic traditions continue to have an impact on many curricula (Laakso & Hallberg Adu, 2024).

The existence of European or other foreign knowledge in African education is not the issue. Instead, the issue comes when African knowledge systems are marginalized, regarded as informal, or barred from respectable academic knowledge while one intellectual lineage is viewed as globally better. Therefore, beneficial knowledge from Europe, Asia, the Americas, or anywhere else should not be rejected by a decolonized African educational system. Rather, it should create a more equitable intellectual atmosphere where African viewpoints actively contribute to the definition of knowledge, curriculum, research, and educational priorities.

Six interrelated dimensions such as curriculum, indigenous knowledge, language, pedagogy, teacher education, and research are used in this study to analyze the decolonization of African educational systems. It makes the case that decolonization should be viewed as an institutional and epistemological shift intended to give Africans back control over what education entails, what it teaches, how it teaches, and whose knowledge is accepted.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Many African educational systems still use colonial-era frameworks even after decades of political independence. Colonial languages remain dominant in many schools and universities, curriculum usually prioritize European historical and intellectual viewpoints, and indigenous knowledge is often barely represented in formal education. These difficulties make it possible for African students to study their cultures using ideas and resources that were mostly created outside of their own historical and cultural contexts.

This issue is demonstrated by research on higher education in Africa. Scholars in Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, and Zimbabwe recognized the Eurocentric nature of university curricula as a significant concern in

decolonization debates, according to Laakso and Hallberg Adu (2024). On the same development, current research stated that courses at African institutions must be more directly tied to African histories, cultures, experiences, and societal demands (Msila & Gumbo, 2016).

Therefore, insufficient access to education is not the main issue. It is the continuation of an educational system that could perpetuate external intellectual priorities at the expense of information produced locally. Addressing this dilemma demands educational reform that moves beyond superficial curriculum change toward fundamental epistemic transformation.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This article seeks to:

1. Analyze how colonialism has affected African educational systems historically and currently;
2. Examine the role that indigenous knowledge plays in changing education;
3. Analyze how African languages contributed to the decolonization of schooling;
4. Determine whether curriculum and pedagogical reform is necessary;
5. Make doable recommendations for enhancing African epistemic agency through education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The article addresses the following questions:

1. How does coloniality continue to influence African education systems?
2. Why is indigenous knowledge important to educational decolonization?
3. What role should African languages play in decolonized education?
4. How can African curricula and pedagogies become more contextually relevant?
5. What institutional reforms are necessary to advance the decolonization of African education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Colonialism and the African Education System

Colonial education was created within the larger political and economic frameworks of colonial dominance. As a result, education was not politically neutral. Assumptions regarding the social and economic responsibilities that African inhabitants were supposed to play were mirrored in educational systems in various colonial contexts. Curriculum design often focused on practical and vocational skills to train Africans for specific tasks within colonial economies, according to studies of British colonial education (Bude, 1983).

Because educational institutions often have significant institutional continuity, this historical legacy is still relevant today. Political sovereignty was altered by independence, but educational institutions did not always undergo the same epistemic changes. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015), coloniality refers to the persistence of power and knowledge patterns linked to colonialism even after official colonial rule has ceased.

Therefore, comprehending educational decolonization requires a knowledge of the difference between colonialism and coloniality. Colonialism refers to direct political and territorial rule, whereas coloniality reflects permanent frameworks through which particular types of knowledge, identity, culture, and power are valued. According to this viewpoint, a nation can preserve educational systems that perpetuate colonial hierarchies of knowledge while still being politically autonomous.

2. Indigenous Knowledge and African Epistemologies

African societies had a variety of knowledge-transmission mechanisms prior to colonial invasion. Oral traditions, storytelling, apprenticeship, community involvement, environmental observation, cultural practices, proverbs, songs, rituals, and intergenerational relationships were all used to transmit knowledge. These systems should not be viewed as a single, homogenous African knowledge system because they varied significantly throughout African societies.

In order to challenge prevailing beliefs about knowledge and research, Chilisa (2012) highlights the significance of indigenous research approaches. Alternative perspectives on the connections between researchers, communities, knowledge, and lived experience can be obtained through indigenous approaches. Their significance extends beyond research methodology to broader problems concerning whose knowledge is recognized inside educational institutions.

Therefore, chances for indigenous knowledge systems to engage with current scientific and academic knowledge should be created by decolonizing African education. Instead of being romanticized, such integration ought to be strict. It is important to record, analyze, safeguard, and contextualize indigenous knowledge. Instead of substituting one type of intellectual domination with another, the objective should be intellectual pluralism.

Additionally, recent research argues that the African curriculum should prioritize indigenous knowledge rather than regard it as an elective (Curriculum Perspectives, 2023). This strategy acknowledges that African communities have intellectual resources that can help address current issues in governance, community development, agriculture, environmental management, medicine, conflict resolution, and social organization.

3. Language and Educational Decolonization

One of the most crucial aspects of educational decolonization is language. Today in many African nations, colonial languages are widely being used in higher education and government offices as official languages. Although the linguistic situation varies greatly between nations, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish continue to be the most often used languages in many educational contexts.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) made a notable connection between language and identity, culture, and power. For Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, education can cause a gap between the learner and the community when it is predominantly taught in a language that is unrelated to their daily social surroundings. As a result, I believe language is more than just a means of communication; it also conveys cultural meanings, histories, values, and perspectives on reality.

This does not imply that African schools should stop teaching colonial languages. Global study, diplomacy, science, technology, and worldwide communication can all be accessed through the use of international languages. Creating multilingual systems where African languages have true academic and intellectual standing is a challenge.

In addition to learning foreign languages, a decolonized educational system should allow students to become highly literate in African languages. With this method, students may engage in international knowledge networks without having to give up their linguistic and cultural identities.

4. Curriculum as a Site of Decolonization

One of the most visible sites of educational authority is the curriculum. It establishes which histories are remembered, which ideas are researched, which information is analyzed, and whose

experiences are deemed important from an academic standpoint.

African history and viewpoints have frequently been criticized for not being adequately represented in the African curriculum. According to Shizha (2013), indigenous voices may still be marginalized in postcolonial school curricula. Academic disciplines may continue to rely disproportionately on Western theoretical traditions and literature, according to surveys of higher education in Africa.

Therefore, a methodical analysis of educational content is necessary for curriculum decolonization. For example, African societies should be portrayed in history courses as historical actors rather than just as victims of European involvement. African political theory should be studied alongside European political theory in political science. African economic realities and locally applicable development theories should be incorporated into economics. African pedagogical traditions should be examined in educational programs. African ecological expertise and current environmental issues should be incorporated into environmental research.

Curriculum decolonization shouldn't, however, turn into intellectual isolationism. African students need to be able to engage in international political, scientific, technological, and economic systems. Thus, a curriculum that is both globally engaged and African-centered should be the goal.

5. Pedagogy and the Teacher-Learner Relationship

Relationships in the classroom must also alter as part of decolonization. Authority, memorization, discipline, and the dissemination of officially sanctioned knowledge were frequently prioritized in colonial educational systems. Certain traditional pedagogical norms still favor the teacher as the major authority, despite the fact that modern African educational systems differ greatly.

Discussion, critical thinking, inquiry, teamwork, and contextual learning should all be promoted by a decolonized pedagogy. It is important to support students in making connections between academic ideas and their personal experiences and communities.

This strategy is in line with more general decolonial education, which sees education as a forum for contesting unequal power and knowledge relations (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Therefore, rather than just imparting preconceived knowledge, educators should be facilitators of inquiry.

6. Decolonization in African Higher Education

Because universities generate educators, researchers, policymakers, professionals, and future leaders, higher education plays a particularly significant role. Narrow knowledge hierarchies may have an impact on basic and secondary education if universities continue to perpetuate them.

The Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa in 2015 has heightened current discussions about decolonizing higher education. Academics in a number of African nations have addressed issues related to Eurocentric curricula, knowledge production, and the depiction of African scholarship, as Laakso and Hallberg Adu (2024) show.

Asefa (2022) stated that colleges must reevaluate the epistemological presumptions ingrained in the creation of academic knowledge in order to undergo decolonial change. As a result, the problem goes beyond curriculum material. Priorities for research, academic publishing, institutional governance, promotion standards, citation guidelines, and the allocation of intellectual authority are all part of it.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative narrative literature review was used in this article. The methodology was chosen because,

rather than gathering primary quantitative data, the study aims to synthesize current scholarship on coloniality, African education, curricular transformation, indigenous knowledge, language, and decolonial theory.

Scholarly databases, academic publications, and institutional sources were used to find pertinent scholarly material. Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly publications, and current studies on African education and decolonization were all included in the literature. The literature on curriculum, indigenous knowledge, language, higher education, and epistemic revolution received special attention.

There were three phases of the analysis. In order to find recurrent conceptual elements about colonialism and African education, sources were first analyzed. Second, the literature was arranged according to research, pedagogy, teacher education, indigenous knowledge, curriculum, and language. Third, a multifaceted framework for educational decolonization was created by synthesizing the data.

The article does not purport to offer statistical generalizations about all African educational systems because it is a literature-based analysis. There are significant linguistic, political, historical, and educational distinctions among the 54 nations that make up Africa. Instead, the goal is to find general trends and ideas that might guide educational reforms tailored to particular contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Decolonization Requires More Than Changing Textbooks

The literature shows that adding a few African authors to already-existing reading lists is insufficient to promote educational decolonization. The underlying question is about the mechanisms that define what constitutes knowledge, even though representation is crucial.

The inclusion of African scholars in a curriculum may become symbolic rather than revolutionary if the underlying presumptions about legitimate knowledge are left unaltered. Institutions must consider how knowledge is created, assessed, taught, and shared in order to achieve true decolonization.

University curricula should therefore be reviewed at the level of disciplines, theories, techniques, examples, evaluation procedures, and research agendas. African scholarship shouldn't be included just to meet a certain number. It ought to make a significant contribution to theoretical discussions and the creation of knowledge.

2. Reconstructing the African Curriculum

Recognizing that African educational demands differ from those of Europe or North America should be the first step in curriculum redesign. Poverty, inequality, public health, violence, displacement, climate change, agricultural development, governance, youth employment, and technological transformation are among the particular issues that African societies must deal with.

Thus, local and regional realities should be reflected in educational curricula.

For instance, traditional environmental knowledge can be combined with contemporary agricultural science in agricultural education. Biomedical methods and culturally relevant community health practices can be combined in public health education. African political institutions, indigenous governance customs, modern state development, and regional integration can all be studied by political scientists. Instead of using colonialism as the main organizing framework, history education can show African societies through their own political, economic, intellectual, and cultural paths.

History, social justice, self-determination, indigenous knowledge, and indigenous languages are all crucial components in the decolonization of South African basic education, according to Rapanyane (2024). These ideas are more applicable in African educational settings, but their application needs to be tailored to the unique linguistic and historical contexts of each nation.

3. Integrating Indigenous Knowledge with Modern Knowledge

There is a widespread misconception that decolonisation necessitates a decision between Western and indigenous knowledge. Such a dichotomous approach is superfluous and could even be detrimental.

Instead, African education needs to encourage dialogue about knowledge. When both are seriously and ethically studied, indigenous knowledge and modern scientific knowledge can coexist. For example, while contemporary environmental science can offer more instruments for measurement, modelling, and action, indigenous environmental practices may offer insights into sustainable resource management.

Epistemic pluralism; many knowledge traditions contributing to the creation and application of knowledge should be the goal.

By showing how indigenous research paradigms can question standard assumptions about knowledge and interactions between researchers and communities, Chilisa (2012) offers a crucial methodological foundation for this approach.

4. African Languages as Instruments of Intellectual Independence

A key component of decolonising education should be language reform. Linguistic imbalance can turn into educational inequality when African languages are mainly used for informal communication while colonial languages predominate in government institutions, scientific journals, universities, and exams.

Therefore, African governments and academic institutions ought to make investments in the creation of terminology, textbooks, dictionaries, digital resources, teacher-training materials, and scholarly publications in African languages.

A balanced approach can be offered by multilingual education. In addition to learning international languages, learners can become academically proficient in an African language. By doing this, local identity would be strengthened without restricting involvement in international scholarship.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) continues to have a significant impact on this discussion since his research shows the relationship between language and both intellectual strength and cultural awareness.

5. Transforming Teacher Education

The transformation of education revolves around teachers. If instructors are not equipped to carry out the curriculum, even a well-designed curriculum cannot accomplish significant decolonisation.

African intellectual history, indigenous knowledge systems, African educational philosophies, culturally sensitive pedagogy, multilingual education, and critical perspectives on colonial history should all be incorporated into teacher education programs.

Additionally, educators must be urged to use local resources as teaching tools. When their expertise is properly recorded and critically assessed, elders, local historians, craftspeople, farmers, cultural practitioners, community leaders, and other knowledge holders can contribute to learning.

Additionally, these collaborations would facilitate communication between schools and the communities they serve.

6. Reforming Assessment Systems

Another major problem is assessment. Curriculum changes might not have much of an impact if tests still reward memorization of material created outside of the classroom.

Critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, communication, teamwork, and the capacity to apply knowledge to local issues should all be assessed in decolonized evaluations. Community-based projects, research assignments, oral presentations, practical work, and problem-solving exercises are additional forms of assessment.

This does not imply a rejection of academic standards. Instead, it necessitates expanding the definition of academic brilliance so that students are evaluated on their capacity to use knowledge in a meaningful way rather than just copying it.

7. Transforming African Research and Knowledge Production

Beyond education, decolonization needs to include research. While preserving close international cooperation, African colleges should increasingly base their research agendas on African priorities.

Communities should be encouraged to participate in the formulation of research questions, and research institutions should promote studies that address important local issues. Indigenous research methodology can give valuable approaches for creating more reciprocal interactions between academics and communities (Chilisa, 2012).

Attention must also be paid to academic publishing. Scholarly databases, international networks, research funding, and publishing possibilities are frequently inaccessible to African researchers. More intellectual autonomy can be achieved by bolstering African journals, university presses, research facilities, and regional scholarly networks.

Intellectual detachment from the global academic community should not be the goal. Rather, African academia ought to contribute to global knowledge production from a more equal position.

8. The Role of Technology in Decolonizing Education

There are hazards and opportunities associated with digital technology. Digital platforms can facilitate the development of free educational resources, digital archives, African-language learning materials, and online research communities, as well as increase accessibility to African study.

However, if African institutions solely rely on internationally created educational materials and platforms, technology may potentially perpetuate current disparities. Therefore, investments in African digital infrastructure and content should be part of digital transformation.

Digital repositories of African research, historical records, oral histories, indigenous knowledge resources, and locally produced educational materials can be supported by governments and universities. Both educational access and intellectual preservation would be strengthened by such programs.

9. Institutional Leadership and Policy

Individual teachers cannot be the exclusive source of educational decolonization. Institutional and governmental commitment is necessary.

Policies that support curriculum review, indigenous languages, regionally relevant teacher

education, African scholarship, and culturally responsive pedagogy should be established by education ministries. Curriculum committees of academics, students, communities, and pertinent professional stakeholders should be established by universities.

Additionally, institutional leadership needs to understand that decolonization is an ongoing process rather than a single reform initiative. Because cultures, technology, knowledge, and educational demands evolve, curriculum reform must be reviewed on a regular basis.

PROPOSED FRAMEWORK FOR DECOLONIZING AFRICAN EDUCATION

This article suggests a seven-dimensional framework based on the examined literature:

1. Curriculum Transformation

African curricula should preserve access to world knowledge while reflecting African histories, societies, intellectual traditions, and current issues.

2. Epistemic Pluralism

Educational institutions should promote communication across indigenous, African, and global knowledge systems and acknowledge a variety of legitimate knowledge traditions.

3. African Language Development

African languages should be acknowledged more as academic, research, teaching, and intellectual production languages.

4. Pedagogical Transformation

Conversation, inquiry, critical thinking, teamwork, and contextual learning should all be incorporated into instruction.

5. Teacher Professional Development

African educational ideas, indigenous knowledge, bilingual education, and culturally responsive pedagogy should all be taught to teachers.

6. Research Transformation

African academic publications, community involvement, indigenous methods, and locally relevant research goals should all be strengthened by African research institutes.

7. Institutional and Policy Reform

Decolonization necessitates a coordinated system-wide approach. Therefore, governments and educational institutions should develop policies, funding mechanisms, and institutional structures capable of sustaining decolonial transformation. These dimensions are interdependent: curriculum reform without language reform may remain limited; indigenous knowledge integration without teacher preparation may become symbolic; research reform without institutional funding may be unsustainable.

CHALLENGES TO DECOLONIZING AFRICAN EDUCATION

Decolonization is vital, but putting it into practice is quite difficult.

First, the educational systems and colonial histories of African nations vary. For example, a reform suitable for Kenya might not be suitable for other countries like Rwanda, Nigeria, South Africa, Ethiopia and South Sudan, a reform suitable for Kenya might not be suitable. Therefore, decolonization must refrain from producing yet another standardized model.

Second, there can be disagreements on the definition of indigenous knowledge. There are thousands of language and cultural groups in African society. The wisdom of one group should not be presented by policymakers as the knowledge of the entire continent.

In addition, curriculum creation, textbook production, teacher preparation, research, and language development may all be hampered by funding limitations. Long-term investment is necessary for educational change.

Finally, African universities are still influenced by international academic systems. Incentives that support well-established Western academic traditions can be created by international rankings, publication requirements, accreditation programs, and scholarly review.

CONCLUSION

Intellectual agency is at the core of the decolonization of African education. African cultures must exercise more control over knowledge, curriculum, language, research, pedagogy, and educational priorities in order to achieve educational independence. Political freedom laid the groundwork for African self-government.

This article's examination of the literature shows how colonialism still affects African education through institutional practices, knowledge creation, curriculum structures, and language hierarchy. Decolonization, however, should not be seen as a rejection of global or European knowledge. Rather, it ought to establish an educational setting where African knowledge systems can more fairly engage with global knowledge.

In addition to teaching students about Africa, a reformed African educational system should equip them with the skills necessary to engage with the world community with confidence. While granting access to foreign languages, it should value indigenous languages. While continuing to engage rigorously with modern science, it should acknowledge indigenous wisdom. It need to support both international academic cooperation and African scholarship.

Therefore, rather than educational isolation, educational sovereignty and epistemic justice are the ultimate goals. African educational systems ought to be places where African students may recognize themselves, their cultures, languages, histories, and intellectual traditions as valid sources of information. Simultaneously, students should develop the analytical and critical skills necessary to address global issues.

Decolonization is not a rejection of knowledge; rather, it is a change in the circumstances surrounding the recognition, production, transmission, and application of information. Governments, academic institutions, educators, researchers, communities, students, and legislators must continue to work together for it to succeed. Stronger African intellectual traditions, more pertinent curricula, increased cultural confidence, and educational systems better prepared to handle the continent's current and future difficulties can all result from the judicious implementation of decolonized education.

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