

# Curriculum, knowledge, and the idea of South Africa

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## **Abstract**

South Africa is an important social space in world history and politics for understanding how the modern world comes to deal with the questions of social difference, and the encounter of people with different civilizational histories. In this essay I argue that a particular racial idea inflected this encounter. One of the ways in which this happened was through the dominance of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century positivism. In setting up the argument for this essay, I begin with a characterization of the nature of early South Africa's modernity, the period in which the country's political and intellectual leadership began to outline the kinds of knowledges they valued. I argue that a scientism, not unlike the positivism that emerges in many parts of the world at this time, came to inform discussions of progress and development in the country at the end of the nineteenth century. This was continued into the early twentieth century, and was evident in important interventions in the country such as the establishment of the higher education system and initiatives like the Carnegie Inquiry of 1933. The key effect of this scientism, based as it was on the conceits of objectivity and neutrality, was to institute suspicion of *all* other forms of knowing, and most critically that of indigenous knowledge. In the second part of the paper, I show that this scientism persists in the post-apartheid curriculum project. Finally, I make an exploratory argument, drawing on the concept of the 'transaction' in John Dewey, for a new approach to knowing.

**Keywords:** politics of knowledge, sociology of knowledge, South African curriculum, decoloniality and knowledge, colonial education

## **Introduction**

The relationship between knowledge and the curriculum, and thereby the nature of education in South Africa, has only once enjoyed the sustained attention of scholars, policymakers, and educationists. In July 1934, the New Education Fellowship brought

together a large number of people in Cape Town and Johannesburg to discuss the nature of education in a modernizing world (Malherbe, 1937). The occasion was deeply important, led as it was by the country's foremost educationists, and attended by some of the world's leading social scientists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and John Dewey. A particular point of interest in the conference was how the indigenous people of South Africa could be 'understood'. Poignant as this moment was, this gathering could not quite come to a resolution about the question of how knowledge, the curriculum, and the practice of education in South Africa came together. Consequences of this development have been that the issues of progress and development, the relationship between the country's different cultural histories and, most importantly, the character of its modernity have never been approached systematically. Critical to this neglect is the institutionalization into South African knowledge discourses of a distinct *othering*. The argument I make here is that South Africa remains, as a result, trapped in a particularly problematic kind of modernist logic. This logic is unable to engage with the complexity of the social world it seeks to make sense of.

In setting up the argument for this essay, I begin with a characterization of South Africa's modernity. I argue, following Saul Dubow, that a scientism, not unlike the positivism and the empiricism that emerges in many parts of the world at this time, came to inform discussions of progress and development in the country around the end of the nineteenth century (Beinart and Dubow, 1995). The key effect of this scientism, based as it was on the conceits of objectivity and neutrality, was to institute suspicion of *all* other forms of knowing, and most critically that of indigenous knowledge. In the second part of the paper I show how much the *othering* that is inherent in this scientism persists in the post-apartheid curriculum project. In the final part of the essay I make an exploratory argument, drawing on the concept of the 'transaction' in Dewey, for a new approach to knowing.

### **The certainty of science**

It is striking how tardy the growth of education is in South Africa up to the early 1900s. There is not the same impetus, much less enthusiasm, for education that one sees in the United States, which has an almost parallel modern historical timeline to that of South Africa. The essential difference between the two countries is, of course, the significantly earlier incorporation of the future United States into the rapidly growing global economy. However, once the idea of state formation seized hold in the late nineteenth century, once the reality struck the different groupings and social formations in the region that they would have to forge a common existence for themselves, and that no one was going to voluntarily *return* anywhere – Afrikaners to the Netherlands, English-speaking whites to Britain, and even Bantu-language speakers to some mythical central African homeland – the question of how this

common existence would be managed began to be contested. Out of this struggle a very particular conception of education comes to prevail on the South African landscape.

This education, in both its dominant racialized colonial and apartheid evocation, and in virtually all the forms of opposition to this domination, was underpinned by particular ways of knowing. Religious education was, of course, omnipresent in this struggle, both that form of severe Afrikaner Calvinism which was premised on ideas, on the one hand, of traditional closed family values, and, on the other, of predestination, and the more liberal-infused credo of sobriety, industry, and civilization. But it is what Christopher Allsobrook calls 'positivism' that comes to provide the era with its central conceptual moorings (n.d.: 3). This positivism, as he says, refers to a 'wider intellectual tradition of *dispassionate, objective, technically oriented scientism* [his emphasis] which obscures particular qualities of things by trying to abstract from them in representation all traces of subjective judgement ...' (ibid.).

Missionaries worked hard for about a century, from the late 1840s to the 1950s, in concert with certain elements of the British colonial government and individual merchant capitalists at the Cape, to defend a form of humanism. This approach, in which freedom, equality, solidarity, and reason came together around a particular ideal, was not itself unproblematic. While it was against scientism, and contained its own compromising reservations about African people and their cultural attributes, it committed itself to a *knowing* that sought to make people of colour equal to Europeans. It did not emerge, however, as the dominant approach to knowing and education. What came to prevail was a discursive sensibility among the white ruling class, often punctuated and even disrupted in contradictory ways by the intervening themes of class, gender, language, and religion, which was conceptualized, framed, managed, and delivered in the register of science, a way of knowing that claimed for itself objective neutrality. This sensibility came to inform the conventional wisdom around 'race', culture, and social difference.

Politically this register took its impetus from the alliance between the English and Afrikaans-speaking white elite in the decades after the South African War, or the Boer War (1899–1902) as it would have been referred to earlier, when, as Dubow suggests in *A Commonwealth of Knowledge* (2006), the Milner 'Kindergarten' Cape Colonials and the dominant D.F. Malan faction in the Afrikaner National Party developed an alliance around a new idea of South Africa. This alliance was facilitated by an awareness of the costs of the South African War and particularly the ongoing threat that was posed to the possibility of the establishment of a new white South African union. Public support in Britain declined for crude imperial jingoism, and in South Africa itself the 'civilizing mission' for the 'natives' associated with

mid-nineteenth-century Cape liberalism had 'been rendered illegitimate for both Afrikaner and colonial nationalists' (Allsobrook, n.d.: 4). This view was expressed in the South African Native Affairs Commission of 1905 by some who questioned the value of education for African people (Beinart, 1993: 69). Dubow explains that 'an inviting alternative ... was to neutralize the idea of civilization (propagated by the liberals), by stripping it of its overt moralism so as to reposition it more centrally in the idiom of scientific and technical proficiency' (2006: 178). The 'neutral' activity of knowledge creation becomes then for this alliance the basis of cultivating a future social order. The future South Africa is then to be constructed not on the basis of prejudice but of 'objective knowing' – and particularly 'knowing' the 'natives.'

The passage of scientism as a holding idea for a united South Africa is never straightforward. But it came to be, repeatedly, the basis on which the question of 'progress' was resolved in South Africa. It found validity and support in global developments where 'big science' came to provide the world's dominant economies with its new ideas of 'scientific' management: knowledge-driven administration and 'expertise'-led policymaking. It was also, of course, stimulated by the technical demands of South Africa's mining and industrial revolution and the necessity for managing the labour needs of the economy.

In the context of this, one sees the emergence in the 1920s and the 1930s of important technocrats such as H.J. van der Bijl who, with the help of philanthropic organizations like the Carnegie Corporation of New York, oversaw the growth in this period of universities and powerful government agencies such as the Board of Trade and Industries, the Social and Economic Planning Council, the Industrial Development Corporation, and critically, the Bureau for Education and Social Research (later to become the Human Sciences Research Council).<sup>1</sup> In this period one sees the rapid development of disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and especially anthropology in the South African universities, and the rise to prominence of expert-driven commissions of inquiry both inside and outside the state, with the Carnegie Inquiry into white poverty in the late 1920s being the most prominent example.

Holding this grand endeavour together is a faith in 'dispassionate' enquiry. The time is the age of the detached and disinterested observer (Dubow, 2006).

There are three important insights to take away from these developments. The first is how significantly this purportedly scientific discourse allowed and even stimulated the idea of a neutral, value-free path to social development and progress to grow in South Africa. The attraction of the 'scientific' and 'objective' promise that underpinned the Carnegie Inquiry and the commitment of anthropology, sociology, and psychology to neutral 'fact' provided opinion- and policymakers the assurance that they had 'triumphed over ideology' and especially the race-preoccupation of old-style Afrikaner nationalism and the romanticism of Cape liberalism. The importance

of this for this discussion is in understanding the degree to which 'science' was deployed to legitimize white rule in South Africa.

The second insight is how extraordinarily this 'objectivity' came to prevail. I have argued elsewhere (Soudien, 2015) in describing the evolution of these developments how significantly they were inscribed in contestation and ambivalence. There were individuals in the South African academy who challenged the dominant theories of the nature of society (Hendricks and Vale, 2005), but the scientific discourse that took hold of the country was particularly susceptible to the prevailing colonial sensibility that racial difference could be explained in biological terms (Dubow, 1995). As Phillips argued (1993: 23), the evolution of anthropology in South Africa under the leadership of scholars such as Radcliffe-Brown would shape the global trajectory of the discipline. Out of this emerged the basic vocabulary and discursive approach through which social difference was explained.

The leading academics in South African social science were R.F.A. Hoernle, C.T. Loram, E. Brookes, and E.G. Malherbe, representing the English side and bringing the influence of the American academy; and W.W. Eiselen and W. Verwoerd representing the Afrikaans. Eiselen and Verwoerd had been trained in Germany, but all took their intellectual authority from this new scientism. It allowed them, as Dubow said (Beinart and Dubow, 1995: 34), to promote the belief that they could discover an objective framework 'in which the natives and the whites may live together without conflict'. The logical solution of segregation of the 'races,' which is what virtually all of these intellectuals subscribed to in one form or another, was - in a largely unproblematic but not uncontested way - seen as a *progressive* development. In this approach, cultural relativism became political pluralism. This approach had - and this is what gave it the sense of being progressive - the virtue of recognizing the distinctiveness of an African world view. But it also came to the conclusion that this African world view was inferior and so required its own governing arrangements. The essential premise of this pluralism rested on the disguised scientific-racist belief that there was a distinct 'African temperament'. Rendered initially in biological terms and then later in those of culture, the experts believed, appealing to but distorting Boasian and even Deweyan progressive thinking, that they had come to grasp the African mind. They had, after all, scientific psychometric data collected through the work of the Bureau of Education established by Ernest Malherbe to show exactly where this mind was.<sup>2</sup> Their contention, working in paradigms that supposedly deferred to Dewey, was that in seeking to civilize the African, colonial education was patronizing and that what was needed instead was an education that was practical. Loram was to say that the need in African education was 'to bring the school into an intimate relationship with real life, in framing curricula in terms of present-day needs, and in making school activities a replica of those of the world outside' (Allsobrook, n.d.: 15).

And the third observation is how this sensibility comes to work among the nascent community of intellectuals of colour. As Allsobrook said, important African intellectuals resisted the collapse of missionary education (n.d.: 14). People like J.T. Jabavu were to say in the late nineteenth century, 'we are not champions of classical education, but merely claim for our people a fair field and no favour' (ibid.). But there was sufficient ambivalence among African intellectuals around the issue of what would be a 'useful education,' especially after the second wave of their contact with intellectual developments elsewhere in the world, marked by the opening of a path by key African intellectuals such as Charlotte Maxeke to Wilberforce University in the USA in 1896. There these African intellectuals would be swept up in the debates between Du Bois and Booker T. Washington about whether education for Africans should be practical or bookish (Odendaal, 2012: 252–4), and would return, as John Dube, a late nineteenth-century African leader and intellectual did, to establish schools such as Ohlange, which were based on Booker T. Washington's ideas of self-help. Critically, 'self-help' in this debate did not include much acknowledgement of local knowledge. The African elite were subsumed within the dominant debate.

What was the significance of these developments for the kind of modernity that developed in South Africa? The most crucial point to make is that they constituted modernity around a broad consensus – an *idea* of South Africa in which race and knowledge were powerfully coupled. In the philology, sociology, and anthropology that was taught at university level, and in the texts used for subjects such as history and geography at school level, there was clear evidence of the use of this scientism. It took its most extreme form, as a UNESCO study of South African textbooks found (Dean *et al.*, 1983), in subjects such as history, where racial taxonomy in its crudest forms were reported.<sup>3</sup> In this idea were understandings and approaches that were validated and empowered, and others that were occluded. In its sophisticated forms, such as the work of Radcliffe-Brown, it would talk about kinship patterns. In its crass form it depended on the discourses of physiognomy, measures of cranial capacity, and used words like 'prognathism' (Dubow, 1995). It mobilized a distinctive vocabulary from which emanated, as far as it was concerned, dispassionate ways in which to talk about people.

In understanding the significance of this scientism for the project of modernity, it is important to understand how much this science was actually used. As Phillips explains (1993: 24), as early as the 1920s the knowledge of this scientific method was being popularized in manuals and training materials that were being 'distributed to magistrates and missionaries.' Validated in these processes was the idea of an *improving* South Africa carried on the wings of science.

There are two points to take away from this. The first is how much scientism as a discourse sets up the terms of engagement for knowledge in South Africa in binary

terms. The logic of scientism was presented as objective and neutral. It is what it occludes that is important for the purpose of this discussion on knowledge. It effectively delegitimized other forms of knowing. The implicit and explicit claims it made for itself are important to understand. It presented itself as being at the apex of civilization, as surpassing in its methodological detachment – its supposed foundations in objectivity – all other extant forms of knowing. In scientism was to be found unassailable understanding and clarity with respect to anything that was worth knowing. It came to provide, in the present in processes such as the National Development Plan (see National Planning Commission, 2012), the content of modern formal South Africa in all its manifestations. Allsobrook states:

*Under the positivist cover of objectivity, a common set of economic doctrines, accounting methods, audit criteria, loan conditions, rating tables, corporate governance practices, public-private initiatives, tax-sensitive ownership structures, environmental protocols, and so on, has been instituted in fields as diverse as law and medical research, in the administration of hospitals, prisons, casinos, schools and shopping malls, in commodities markets, security firms, the military and even the state, whose values and purposes are seldom contested because they are considered, according to a sharp positivist distinction, to be objective, technically, or private, culturally.*

(Allsobrook, n.d.: 18)

The second and related point is that this binary logic both implicitly and explicitly referenced indigenous knowledge and local ways of knowing. This referencing was evident *all* the time as policy and law for the ideal South Africa were being developed. But it was not always or easily brought to expression. The one moment when it was most explicitly carried through arose in the complex work of the Eiselen Commission of 1949, established to investigate how 'native' education should be managed in the country. One sees in the report of this Commission the systematic subversion and subordination of understandings of the world of African people that did not conform to the dominant attitudes lodged in the science of the day through both omission and denigration. The intellectual context from which the Eiselen Commission proceeded was the assumption that modern science had the capacity, because of and through its 'rigour' and 'objectivity', to comprehend the full complexity of human relationships and the society in which these relations played themselves out. In terms of this for the Eiselen Commission, therefore, African people stood perfectly revealed, stripped of all mystery, and eminently comprehensible.

The social effects of this scientism were important. Key within it, in Gramscian terms, is the way in which subordinate groups – by being *known* – were incorporated into the social and epistemological regimen of the controlling order. Ruling, it is argued here, is about power, but more precisely, about the mediation of that power

through its ability to name, classify, and catalogue social information. The power of the Eiselen Commission, and thus the hierarchizing power of scientism, emanated from the almost imperceptible syntax and grammar inscribed in its very particular forms of *knowing*. The Commission rendered the African people 'comprehensible.' It was able to come to the conclusion that it would take African people 1,000 years to reach the cultural development of Europeans. This science gave Verwoerd, the future prime minister of South Africa, the authority and confidence to say in a speech to the Senate in June 1954 that 'there is no place for him [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour' (Roux, 1964: 395).

The Eiselen Commission, and indeed all the commentaries that continued to be carried out on the ways of understanding the world of African people, did not explicitly come to terms with their cosmologies and epistemologies. The 'science' on which they were based did not develop the modalities for understanding what these other forms of knowing were. This science counterpoised itself to these *other* understandings by asserting its own strengths and virtues. It emphasized what it could do and by particular forms of comparison indicated what these other ways of knowing *could not* do. For example, it critically appropriated to itself, and not to others, the capacity for higher order thinking. Others, it suggested, did not have this power. This was powerfully evident in the process of the Eiselen Commission in the assessment in which it came to 'the African mind.' It asserted that African people were no less intelligent than other people, but that their ways of life bound them to imitation (Andrew Murray Papers, n.d.). Critically, it effectively dismissed anything that African people had to say either about themselves or knowing. The report of the Eiselen Commission concluded that:

*the traditional material culture of the Bantu is, judged by modern standards, not very rich nor resourceful ... increasing interest has been shown in the study and development of Bantu music and dancing which have authentic genius. From Bantu dancing, oratory and ritual **may** be expected a development of the dramatic arts. The pictorial and plastic arts have only been slightly developed in the traditional cultures.*

(Commission on Native Education, 1953: 12).

The approach of the science of this period, as in the Eiselen Commission process, was to locate the knowledge of African people in the realm of folklore and belief. It was without value and had no contribution to make to civilization.

In summing up this section of the paper it is appropriate to return to the claim made in the introduction about the suspicion of other forms of knowing inherent in scientism. The question stands: was this scientism racist?



Against the ways in which it methodologically displaced other forms of knowing, I want to argue that it was. In the South African context it performed the role of invalidating black people's self-understandings and their understandings of the world. The issue, when looked at in a balanced way, is not about the validity of the knowledges that it displaced, but that it gave no credence at all to these other knowledges. It also allowed a particular form of racial description to become generalized which, as scholars of the impact of school knowledge such as Du Preez (1983) would show, would come to shape the everyday understanding of what 'race' was. In this sense the effects of this scientism were racist.

### **Making curriculum in post-apartheid South Africa**

How then has the post-apartheid order engaged with this legacy?

The new curricular order that came into being after 1997 has gone a long way in explicitly drawing attention to the issues of inclusion and exclusion in the curriculum. In its first iteration of Curriculum 2005, launched in March 1997 by the then Minister of Education, Professor Bhengu, it was described as a strategy for moving away from a racist, apartheid, rote-learning model of learning and teaching to one that was liberating, nation-building, and based on learner-centred outcomes. As with people's education, it committed the new education system to the values of democracy, non-racialism, and non-sexism. All the subsequent versions of this new curricular order, the National Curriculum Statements (NCS) and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), have maintained this commitment. An important elaboration of this position is provided in the introductory elements of the NCS under the heading 'Valuing indigenous knowledge systems' (Department of Education 2003a: 4). This runs as follows:

*In the 1960s, the theory of multiple-intelligences forced educationists to recognize that there were many ways of processing information to make sense of the world, and that, if one were to define intelligence anew, one would have to take these different approaches into account. Up until then the Western world had only valued logical, mathematical and specific linguistic abilities, and rated people as 'intelligent' only if they were adept in these ways. Now people recognize the wide diversity of knowledge systems through which people make sense of and attach meaning to the world in which they live. Indigenous knowledge systems in the South African context refer to a body of knowledge embedded in African philosophical thinking and social practices that have evolved over thousands of years. The National Curriculum Statement Grades 10–12 (General) has infused indigenous knowledge systems into the Subject Statements. It acknowledges the rich history and heritage of this country as important contributors to nurturing*

*the values contained in the Constitution. As many different perspectives as possible have been included to assist problem solving in all fields.*

(Department of Education, 2003a: 4)

The new CAPS documents repeat this sentiment. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement for Grades 10–12 for the Life Sciences has a specific entry on indigenous knowledge systems, which reads:

*2.5.3.2 The Relationship between Indigenous Knowledge and Life Sciences*

*All knowledge stems from views on how the world works. One of the differences between modern science (and technology) and traditional, indigenous knowledge systems is that they have their origins in different world views. Learners should understand the different cultural contexts in which indigenous knowledge systems were developed. The examples of indigenous knowledge that are selected for study should, as far as possible, reflect different South African cultural groups. They should also link directly to specific areas in the Life Sciences subject content.*

(Department of Basic Education, 2011: 17)

These statements are deeply important. They suggest an awareness of the politics of the knowledge systems of South Africa. I would like to suggest, however, that they forgo and so miss the opportunity they so correctly identify, and that they fail to deal with the problem inherited from the country's scientism. Helpful as the new curriculum might be in certain respects, it continues to skate over the surface of the discussion and avoids the epistemological challenge of demonstrating, first of all, what the difference between itself and other forms of knowledge is, particularly the occluded African knowledges it both explicitly and implicitly dismisses; second, whether these differences are capable of any form of mutual recognition; and, third, if they are amenable to some form of mutuality about how their differences can be negotiated. Much of what the notes in the new curricula do is to focus on making the curriculum 'more friendly' and to bring to the practitioner's attention ways of including the learner within the dominant script. This agenda is invariably, not always, and unfortunately, one of assimilating the learner into an unacknowledged hegemonic science discourse and to be more sensitive about how this assimilation is done. In this respect it is a classic liberal multicultural strategy.

This form of multiculturalism emphasizes tolerance but is insufficiently interrogative of its own intellectual assumptions about how culture works and fails to engage with the major issue, namely the cultural history of the new curriculum. What it does is emphasize the differences of race, class, gender, religion, language, and ability in important ways. But it does this *within* a dualistic view of the world. It begins with an essentialized idea of pristine knowledge forms and similarly essentialized ideas of what gives these knowledge forms their fundamental character. It then effectively, in

presenting indigenous knowledge as that which also has to be given consideration, constructs a hierarchy of precedence in knowledge forms. The problem it then presents is that of how the supplementary or additional knowledge forms can be accommodated. Accommodation then is its primary strategic manoeuvre. Indigenous knowledge has to be accommodated *within* science. The problem that needs to be solved is about how to bring this additional knowledge *within* the knowledge system of science. Silences, distortions, and omissions within it need to be corrected.

The argument I am making here is that an inclusive curriculum, or better, a curriculum that is aware of the complexity of inclusion, must do more. It must explain how exclusion results not only socially but also epistemologically and be aware that this epistemological silencing and decentring is complex and can take many forms.

I refer to two key knowledge areas in the curriculum to show how this works, Home Language and History. I argue here that absent in these two key syllabi, which possibly lend themselves more easily than many other areas of enquiry to a self-critical epistemological sense, is a sense of their blind spots. Neither Home Language nor History is approached in a way that exploits the opportunities provided within them to understand how significantly they operate within cultural frames. While this requirement, of being aware of one's blind spots, is an immensely sophisticated one and could be described as being beyond the level of a high school learner, there are several points in the NCS as a whole and in both the History and the Home Language curricula where the opportunity presents itself for the curriculum to take the learner down the road of how the knowledge within it is constructed. In the Grade 12 History syllabus, for example, an Assessment Standard for Learning Outcome 2 explicitly states that concepts such as colonialism are 'social constructs'. This same invocation is made in the CAPS document for History.

While this term 'social construct' is used somewhat confusedly in the NCS History curriculum (Department of Education, 2003a: 19), it presents itself as a way of working constructively to deal with bias. In the generic statement for the NCS a detailed paragraph is inserted that makes a commitment to knowledge systems and refers to knowledge forms and knowledge practices outside the Western mainstream. And yet, neither of the syllabi is able to bring this awareness to a reality. The NCS History syllabus, for example, has moments of possibility in Learning Outcome 4 where debate is encouraged around heritage icons, but the intellectual materials that would be necessary to make this debate also about the knowledge dispensations that valorize the iconography of a social system are not made available. The Home Language curriculum has a section where it gestures in the direction of self-awareness in recognizing how differently the learning process for the blind would need to be managed. In this acknowledgement there is awareness

of how difference is instantiated as a learning experience. This awareness is not extrapolated into the wider curriculum.

The upshot of this analysis is that the curricula for both subjects, in the end, operate well at a superficial level in pointing to omission and marginalization. They demonstrate an awareness of how inclusion and exclusion could issue out of the curriculum with respect to important forms of difference. But they fail at a deeper level. Neither curriculum manifests an ability to present itself as a social construct. In neither does there appear to be strong opportunity for the learner to engage with the fact that the form of knowledge being transacted stands in a certain relationship with other explanations about the world and why the officially sanctioned curriculum enjoys this privileged status. Both are, in the end (not unlike curricula found elsewhere in the world, and in some respects not dissimilar to pre-democracy South African curricula), liberal documents. Like the science of the earlier colonial period, they fail to engage with the reality that knowledge is not just about values and orientation. They fail to show that *methods* are key to how knowledge is presented and authorized. The science that legitimated white domination took its authority from the presumption that the methodologies for its validation were beyond question. They were completely objective. In presenting History and English, curriculum makers projected them as if they were methodologically neutral. The missed opportunity is that the makers of the curricula invoke the idea of social constructedness, but fail to show how this methodology applies to what these curricula say and stand for. In this sense they present themselves as classic liberal curricula. Their liberal characters reside in the extent to which they promote the classic liberal rights and freedoms of the Enlightenment period. This does not make them bad, but it certainly reflects their limitedness. In taking this route, they exclude that which falls outside the Western scientific logics of curricula assembly and institutionalization. Other methodological approaches, including approaches that are evident in African epistemologies, which include learning through observation, argumentation, and experimentation (Chilisa, 2012), are definitionally outside formal consideration. English and History are thus inclusive at a technical level, but exclusive at a more fundamental epistemological level.

Important ways forward here are looking at the curriculum in terms of its capacity to surface for the learner that he or she is operating in a culturally coded world. New criteria for making an assessment of its capacity should include the following:

- Its consciousness of the politics of its own knowledge
- Its understanding of the multiple forms of exclusion and decentring that it might be complicit in

- Its sense of how difference is constituted in its presence and as a result of its presence
- Its awareness of its own power.

### **Epistemological openness**

It is here now that we are confronted with the possibility that the curriculum continues to be defined in fundamentally foreclosing ways. It forecloses on possibilities that knowledge can be approached differently and that there might be alternative, more democratic, ways to achieving understanding and learning. It forecloses on the reality of the majority of young South Africans, which is hybrid, syncretic, and thoroughly mixed up with and in the multiple registers of their European knowledges and affordances and their persistent African understandings and approaches to making meaning. It cannot, in a helpful way, get to the modernity that has actually evolved in South Africa, to the ways in which South Africans have evolved the institutions of their lives, the institutions of birth, the institutions of everyday life, and especially that of learning and the institutions of dying. It fails to recognize and validate other capacities and forms of knowledge to which the marginal child has access. It assumes that young people live in culturally homogeneous worlds in which systems of meaning are consistent and in their semiotic structures coherent. It fails, in relation to this, to understand how this child is working on a daily basis across systems of meaning. The South African child lives in a deeply culturally hybrid world. In the process it misrecognizes the child. The point, as Louise Rosenblatt argues, is that 'education, the curriculum, is not separable from the life out of which someone comes, and to which he or she must return' (Rosenblatt, 1978: 157). When it is separated from the lives of the children it is experienced as alienating. Rosenblatt makes the following observation about this kind of education (taking the example of literature):

*No one else, no matter how much more competent, more informed, nearer the ideal (whatever that might be), can read ... for us ... My concern is with the social and intellectual atmosphere that sets up 'good literature' as almost by definition works accessible only to the elitist critic or literary historian, and that leads the average reader to assume that he simply is not capable of participating in them. Our whole literary culture tends to produce this defeatist attitude.*

(ibid.: 141-2)

Some people have reacted damagingly to this elite dominance. They have come to experience the educational experience as so alienating, so racist, that their response is to say that they want only that which is omitted in the canon placed in front of them, and so make:

*... the absurd claim that ... only women could speak about women in literature, or only blacks understand the works written by blacks. This, of course, negates the capacity of the literary work of art to enable the reader to transcend personal limitations, whether of temperament, sex, race or culture.*

(ibid.: 142)

The point Rosenblatt is making is powerfully illustrated in a recent article carried in the *Sunday Independent* by Mcebisi Ndletyana where he argues that:

*because the colonial and apartheid state debased African culture, its expression quickly assumed a form of defiance ... A contemporary example of such defiance is the rage that blacks exhibit when told by white neighbours or the SPCA that they cannot slaughter within the privacy of their suburban homes.'*

Ndletyana (2013: 17)

The knowledges behind the interests and the positions taken by these different parties do not come into view. People who think of themselves as white cannot understand why people who think of themselves as black would wish to slaughter an animal in the privacy of their homes. They have no access to the rituals and customs of ancestor appeasement surrounding these customs. People who think of themselves as black, by contrast, have insufficient understanding of why those who see themselves as white would be against the slaughter of an animal in a place that is not regulated by the laws governing hygiene and so on. Rosenblatt argues that transcendence of their distinct and monocentric views of the world is not possible if education is steeped in either the triumphalism of scientism or the defiance of the victim of this triumphalism to which Ndletyana draws our attention.

The issue now is that of how we begin to conceptualize an education in which transcendence might take place, in which children can make meaning for themselves in ways that allow them to engage with the full synthesis of all of their knowledge affordances and opportunities, with the full complexity of their lives.

To get beyond the foreclosure of the existing curriculum, I argue, an orientation towards knowledge that proceeds from completely different assumptions to those of scientism is required. Central to a new orientation must be a readiness to identify, marshal, engage with, and develop the range of knowledges and their methodologies that are necessary to understand and work with the complexity of the world and particularly with the complexity of modernity as modernity takes in and subsumes everybody within it. This orientation represents and stands for, I argue here, what is essentially a *progressive* position. It is a position that is most consonant with the historical struggles of intellectuals who sought to work with, develop, and democratize knowledge. The progressiveness they espoused was at once epistemological and

ontological. It was about an attitude to knowledge and a personal awareness of the implications of their attitude for themselves as individuals.

The current South African curriculum presents itself as being progressive. It proceeds on the commitment to a post-apartheid view of the world. This approach, however, has not engaged with the essentially dualistic character of scientism. It has left the distinction this approach to science makes between itself and other forms of knowledge unproblematised. I argue here that if progressivism is to recover its legitimacy in South African education, it has to develop another kind of openness, one that is prepared to engage with the whole spectrum of knowledges and understandings that live on in the South African social and cultural landscape, those that are described as Western, African, modern, traditional, 'powerful', 'useful', and so on, and, fundamentally, the whole spectrum of people that are the living bearers of these knowledges. It calls for a willingness to connect that which appears not to seek connection or wishes to remain disjunct; questions of past, present, and future; what appear to be the incommensurate domains of old and new knowledge, old solutions and new problems.

I argue that a progressive approach is one that is in constant search for the limits and boundaries of its own view of the world and try to show what the implications are of such a position for the questions of 'knowing' in education – who comes to teach and learn, the inclusion and exclusion of people, and the inclusion and exclusion of ideas and knowledge.

What it means to be progressive is by no means established. Dimitriadis and Carlson (2003: 3) explain that it is marked by a range of positions with a variety of accents and emphases and points of departure about what is in the public interest. Significantly, however, it does, in its general approach and in its methodology, appeal to morality and rationality. Much of how it projects itself is premised on the belief that human beings have the ability, through purposeful action, to improve their environments and the conditions of their lives. Progressives believe, therefore, in individual agency. The cumulative significance of these ideas is brought together in the work of Dewey (1987) who argued that the purpose of education was to improve the human condition. Education had to be centred on the individual learner. 'I believe', Dewey said, 'that all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the [human] race ...' (1987: 77).

But Dewey was not oblivious to the complexity of the relationship between the individual and his or her society. Outraged by the arrogance of the scientific-industrial complex that had brought modern America into being, particularly its hubris that science could ultimately solve any problem, the more thoughtful progressives promoted the idea of science and rationality but also that of the need of the state to intervene in everyday life. In terms of this many progressives such

as Dewey deliberately entered and tried to infuse the new disciplines of statistics, economics, sociology, and psychology with a sense of humanism. They:

*set out to gather data on human behavior as it actually was and to discover the laws which governed it. Since social scientists accepted environmentalist and interventionist assumptions implicitly, they believed that knowledge of natural laws would make it possible to devise and apply solutions to improve the human condition ... This faith underpinned the optimism of most progressives and predetermined the methods used by almost all reformers of the time: investigation of the facts and application of social science knowledge to their analysis; entrusting trained experts to decide what should be done; and, finally, mandating government to execute reform.*

(Link and McCormick, 1983: 21–5)

And secondly, they thought that:

*to improve the environment meant, above all, to intervene in economic and social affairs in order to control natural forces and impose a measure of order upon them. This belief in interventionism was a third component of progressivism.*

(Link and McCormick, 1983: 22).

There are clearly issues here in how this progressivism and interventionism can be understood. In an implicit recognition of the critique of much progressivism, Thomas Popkewitz insightfully remarks that it has an inherent schizophrenia (2008: 301). Embedded within it, on the one hand, he says, is a commitment to freedom and inclusion, but there is also the theme of salvation (ibid.). In the ideas of freedom and inclusion is invested hope for the young who are to become self-actualizing agents. The theme of salvation, on the other hand, responds to a dangerous sense of anxiety and fear. Central to this anxiety and fear is an implicit belief that people cannot be trusted and should not be left to themselves.

This criticism is deeply important. It is particularly important in the South African context where progressivism is easily subsumed within white paternalism, where dominant groups decide what is in the 'other's' best interests. How this criticism is worked with in the South African context to develop a self-conscious and progressive post-apartheid vision and practice is what is now called for. Significantly, there is in the broad discourse of the progressive movement an awareness of the schizophrenia raised by Popkewitz. Dewey himself argued for a progressivism that would hold itself to account and seek to historicize its own logic. The way he came to this point of view was through reflecting on the perennial condition of human insecurity.

As George Geiger says, 'man has always found himself coming up against a world dark, uncertain, fraught with peril and mystery, a forbidding and unintelligible



world that demanded propitiation' (Geiger, 1958: 10). Dewey, Geiger argues, saw the emergence of science and rationality as the antidote to this but cautioned against the certainty it promised (ibid: 11-14). Dewey was by no means against science:

*The features of objects reached by scientific or reflective experience are important, but so are all the phenomena of magic, myth, politics, painting and penitentiaries. The assumption of 'intellectualism' goes contrary to the facts of what is primarily experienced. For things are objects to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even more than things to be known. They are things had before they are cognized.*

(Geiger, 1958: 14).

The value of Dewey's caution is that it inserts into progressivism the deeply important realization that knowing is a historical process and that the salvationist conceit of science should not be allowed unfettered dominion. Dewey understood how much inquiry required the use of analytical categories and analytical methods, but he was at pains to draw attention to the idea of discontinuity that this kind of explanation stimulated and inserted into experience. The breaking down of subjects into units of analysis was an important methodological technique, but one had to be careful in thinking that the discrete units themselves represented the reality that was experienced.

An insight to take away from his anxiety about discontinuity is how much he helps us see how analysis that begins and ends in discontinuity creates the conditions for social discontinuity and from the separation this stimulates to social hierarchy – European science morphing into European superiority. He called, instead, for a way of seeing the world as a connected whole. In explaining that human beings 'have things' before they start analysing them, he sought an acknowledgement for the insight that even when an analytic process that separates things out is complete, one is left not with the decontextualized and disembodied thing as it is analysed, but a whole experience, and it is this whole rather than the part that matters. In developing this idea he came up with the term 'transaction' to explain what happens in knowing or cognizing processes that disassemble things. 'Transaction,' he argued, allowed one to relate things, to show how interdependent they were, and, so to speak, to reassemble them.

Geiger argues that Dewey shows how in various transactional experiences the 'related aspects are indeed mutual' (1958: 17). The transaction does not exhaust the range of meaning of all the correlates, but it creates the conditions for seeking continuity and seeking relation. In the process he attacks the idea that some portions of experience are intrinsically more privileged than others. He was against the certainty that privileging wrought. As Geiger says, he got to this point in his life

where he understood the criticism about the imprecision of terms he was using like 'experience' but refused to give them up because he thought that they served as a 'prophylactic against discontinuity' and could be employed to respond to the 'partial empiricism [of science] which selects some aspects of experience as real and others less so' (1958: 15). It is this that is helpful in confronting the schizophrenia of progressivism and coming to see how important a critical reading of it is for thinking about openness in South African education.

In the context in which Dewey found himself, the already dominant industrializing social and economic order of the United States, the 'less-so others' to which he was referring outside the academy were essentially the poor and the less educated. In the South African context it includes the poor and the less educated but the poor and the less educated as they are configured by the history and experience of racism and colonialism and the marginalization of their ways of understanding the world. Central to recovering a progressive orientation is acknowledging and recognizing the existence and currency of local ways of understanding and working in the world. What is required is bringing this whole complexity into the learning experience.

To make this happen, the emphasis should be on a creative transaction, a coming together of a human being (with all that implies of past experience and present occupations) and an 'education with all that that implies for participation' (Rosenblatt, 1978: 145). In this transaction, I suggest, following Rosenblatt's argument about reading in a transactional way (ibid: 143), the learner needs to realize fully what he or she is living through in the moment of the learning encounter. It is this that the teacher needs to awake. Talking about the reading act, Rosenblatt says that this can spark a sense of engaging 'in no matter how amateur a fashion' (ibid.). In this transaction the learner should be experiencing a coming together in the encounter of all his or her past and present experiences a 'realistic [sense of all] ... the strengths and weaknesses' he or she brings to the experience (ibid.). Rosenblatt then says that as the reader, or learner in our case:

*thinks back, keeping the text and his [or her, passim] own responses in focus makes possible a multifaceted kind of clarification. On the one hand he senses the codes under whose sway he has been living through the reading. On the other, he can be made aware of the needs, the assumptions, the sensitivities, and blind spots that he had brought to the transaction. The satisfaction that he felt may have come precisely from the fact that he had been freed for a time from the limitations of his own codes.*

(ibid.: 145)

It is this realization that constitutes a moment of crucial importance for thinking through the historic challenge facing South Africa. It is beholden to neither the past

nor the future simply because of the past for its own sake or the future for what it might bring. Central to it is acknowledgement of the full palette of knowledge forms that circulate in the country and in one's life. The historical moment is one of intense self-consciousness of itself, in which the country – and the individual – sees all that is in front of it – or him or her – and does not render invisible the real ways in which subjects make meaning.

How one makes this self-consciousness happen is what we are looking for, not only in South Africa, but, actually, across the entire globe. Its virtue is that it does not end or begin with any priority other than that which a deep historicization will allow. Do we currently have the policy, the people – intellectuals, policymakers, teachers, and even learners – in a special country such as South Africa, but in other countries too, to make this happen? Possibly not. Of course teachers are at the heart of an intellectual engagement such as this. But so too are the Gramscian organic intellectuals operating in the world of policy that influences the very ether in which teachers operate. A transactional approach is one way in which we can help more of us move – from this heavily occluded space defined in suspicion – to new ground.

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## Notes

1 See Vogel (2006) for an important description of the role of philanthropy in the process of globalizing particular forms of capitalism.

2 See Dubow (1995) for an account of how the work of prominent physical anthropologists at institutions such as the University of Cape Town contributed to this development.

3 See Du Preez (1983) for the clearest discussion of this development.

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