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The posthuman condition: Insights for decolonising curriculum in childhood education

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Background: Recent attempts to rekindle the decolonisation of education project in South Africa, is a reaction to perceptions that there are fundamental frailties in the existing curriculum. Childhood education is yet to take up the challenge in any substantive way.

Aim: To explore the insights critical posthumanism might offer in attempting to address a comprehensive decolonial effort in early childhood education transformational initiatives.

Setting: This essay is framed within the context of curriculum decolonisation and transformation work in early childhood education.

Methods: This experimental think-piece, attempts to theorise early childhood education alongside critical posthumanism.

Results: Staying true to posthuman ways of thinking, doing and becoming, we deliberately avoided presenting any determinist, neatly packaged 'results', in order to further open up the debate to include alternative ways of thinking and doing curriculum work in early childhood ecologies.

Conclusions: Early childhood transformation initiatives, has to recognise the fundamental embeddedness of the existing school subjects in Western-Eurocentric humanist tradition. The effects of this canonical orientation are, that the tenets of Western-Eurocentrism remain unchallenged, that a racialised colonial education prevails in contemporary times, and that the centering of the adult human at the expense of the more-than-human, including child, is sustained. The nature-culture and child or adult dualisms prevail and, a consolidation of a deficit, sub-human construction of children, as immature, fragile and innocent. Critical Posthumanism suggests thinking anew.

Contribution: An interrogation of the assumptions on which contemporary childhood education is based, and consideration for the advancement of posthumanist ways of thinking, doing, and becoming.

Keywords: posthumanism; dualism; decolonisation; childhood education; more-than-human.

Introduction

The curriculum for childhood education has continued to be framed on deficit conceptions of child and sedimented notions of human as the central phenomenological subject. It has also, in recent years, fallen foul to neoliberal persuasions as it relates to measurement of achievement, a caution that Colebrook (2017) contends, threatens the entire education project. She asserts that:

> If education is nothing more than a human science or the achievement of satisfactory outcomes by way of testing, then education has *no future*. (p. 169)

Colebrook's insights are a useful point of departure for the argument that we wish to lead in this essay, which enacts critical posthumanism to challenge the normalisation of humanist principles that underpin school and postschool education contexts. A critical posthumanist stance enables the disruption of the canon of humanist curriculum theories by exposing the colonial tenets that

Note: Special Collection: Interrogating Coloniality in South African Primary Schools.

have shaped how we have come to engage in the world and opening up new ways of re-thinking and doing curriculum (Du Preez, Simmonds & Le Grange 2022; Le Grange & Du Preez 2023). We draw on Murris' provocation as it relates to the contesting humanist notions of child, childhood as well as nature–child and child–adult binaries.

The energy and fervour caused by the posthuman condition is yet to grip the South African educational research space. We recognise though, the immense challenge posed by the posthuman condition, namely, that of disidentification with humanism (Braidotti 2016) and traditional ways of thinking of the child. We believe that given the human-orchestrated existential crises, a product of the Anthropocene, Mao's apt and provocative incitement that '(there) is great disorder under heaven – the situation is excellent' is indeed a call to act decisively (Žižek 2011:xii).

We proceed from what we regard as (two) axiomatic positions: the first is the assertion that while decolonising the South African school curriculum presents a noble and emancipatory imperative, it is only through a profound understanding of the intricacies of Enlightenment humanism, and its relationship to the fabrications of hierarchies (as it relates to race and gender, for example) in the colonising act, that we can begin any kind of authentic curriculum transformation moves in the direction of decoloniality. The second is that the decolonial project (in whatever version) is likely to experience a paralysis, given the somewhat limited opportunity for school teachers (and teacher educators) in South Africa, to acquire profundity and nuance in the understandings of the humanist colonial tradition, especially in relation to its narrow focus on the advancement of the construction of humans, as the centre of all endeavour.

While there are clear points of correlation between posthumanism and decolonial theory (Du Preez 2018; Le Grange 2018), we are also aware of tensions or dissimilarities between posthumanism and decolonial theory. However, like Sousa and Pessoa (2019), we explore the productive borderland (Anzaldúa 1987) between these scholarly fields and how they might augment the broader planetary justice project that embraces the human and the more-than-human. The possibility for epistemic harmonising of indigenous knowledge through creative pedagogy and scholarship has proven to be powerfully effective (see Nxumalo & Mncube 2018).

There is little contention that impetus for the curriculum decolonisation agenda in South Africa (SA) was triggered by (mainly black) higher education students in their demands for a radical review of university curricula. What was evident at the time was that both student agitators and university academics lacked deep (conceptual) knowledge of the discourse of decolonisation and the contestations within (Maistry 2019). In an effort to fast-track the project, many universities in SA systematically institutionalised decolonisation through policy, the effect of which it has been

argued, simply relegated it to that of superficial performance (to be quantified and measured). Le Grange et al. (2020) call this phenomenon, 'decolonial-washing' (Le Grange et al. 2020).

Decolonial theory, antiblackness theory or critical race theory might not find traction in a South African school educational landscape, comprising powerful conservative constituencies that have little proclivity for entertaining decolonial initiatives or non-normative gender or sexuality at school level. It is likely to create consternation for liberals (including academics) across the race groups (Sithole 2016). Of significance is that the residual effects of apartheid, namely, lingering racism and anti-blackness (Majavu 2022), impact the lives of South African learners who have to navigate a racially polarised society, despite political rhetoric around racial and social cohesion (the proverbial rainbow nation).

There is thus good reason to question to what extent the decolonial project will come to fruition in curriculum change processes in South Africa, given slow progress in other areas of need in curriculum. For example, despite years of research and evidence provided that Ralph Tyler's Rationale is not an effective curriculum development approach, it remains the hegemonic approach informing our thinking and doing when it comes to matters of curriculum (Le Grange & Du Preez 2023). With regard to the centrally prescribed school curriculum (not only the CAPS document, but the thinking and doing that influence overall curriculum thinking in South Africa), it is not likely that guardians of childhood education in SA, inscribed in a humanist, Western-Eurocentric mould, will demonstrate the (political) will to mandate policy change committed to decolonial imperatives and attuned to posthuman sensibilities. Research on state-initiated posthuman-inspired curriculum and pedagogy policy implementation in Sweden, for example, revealed the enormous potential that such bold initiatives might hold (Lindgren 2020). Similarly, posthumanist informed higher education programme design in childhood education (Murris & Muller 2018) in South Africa represents ground-breaking work, which warrants greater experimentation.

Childhood education and schooling in South Africa has largely mirrored the traditions 'inherited' from colonial homelands, a replication of the British schooling system in the main. While a process of curriculum restructuring did occur in the post-apartheid phase of the country's history, attempts at transforming the school curriculum (at *that* time, when decolonisation was not in vogue) have been a matter of superficial cleansing – a technical exercise of extricating offensive pro-apartheid content from the school syllabus (Chisholm 2003; Jansen 1999). While the school curriculum has undergone several revisions in the post-apartheid period to improve its accessibility, what is significant for the argument that we wish to lead in this article is that the western-Eurocentric canon remained firmly intact (Le Grange 2016; Maistry 2020). Le Grange makes a strong case that the South African curriculum needs to be liberated

from 'the colonizing fetters of humanism' (Le Grange 2019:212). The structure of schooling, its curriculum and paradigmatic orientation have not altered in any radically conspicuous way. As mentioned earlier, curriculum is constructed alongside the Tylerian Rationale, which Le Grange and Du Preez (2023) describe as a dehumanising, normalising, colonising and homogenising theory. If anything, the shift in nomenclature, more especially the change from the previously used term 'pupil' or 'student' to 'learner', marked a distinct ideological (albeit subtle) re-orientation of the role of the school-going individual as well as the school teacher. Conservative constructions of the child can be traced back since time immemorial. Murris aptly attributes various deficit constructions of child to the seminal work of (un)likely culprit theorists or philosophers including Aristotle, Piaget, Darwin and Vygotsky (Murris 2020b). She contends that '(m)odern schooling positions children as knowledge *consumers* and not knowledge *producers*, because it assumes that they are [*still*] developing, [*still*] innocent, [*still*] fragile, [*still*] immature…', with concomitant constructions of the teacher that include that of 'guide, instructor, trainer, discipliner …' (Murris 2020b:2). This orientation perpetuates the exclusion of curriculum content that is deemed age-inappropriate. These problematically remain largely uncontested conceptions of child, in a South African context characterised by child-headed households (Hall & Sambu 2019), and child responsibility-bearing functions (such as employment and self-sustenance), which do not fit the Western norm for children's activity.

The field of childhood education is a hotly contested arena that spans a continuum of ultra-conservative orientations to the notion of child and the purpose of childhood education, to radical perspectives that advocate for a deconstruction, (re)conceptualisation and (re)configuration of the field and its educational intent.

The posthuman condition and the challenge of humanist disidentification

A key point of departure for attempts at decolonising the school curriculum is a fundamental recognition that humanism continues to haunt the school curriculum across the world making disidentification with humanism (Braidotti 2019) enormously challenging for all especially astute humanist disciples. The genesis of Enlightenment humanism and its response to spiritual and religious epistemologies is well documented in extant literature, with René Descartes credited as the founder of modern western philosophy. Cartesian philosophy subscribes to a self-determining and self-improving human, with exclusive powers of rationality, and universal experience that stems from a mind–body dualism – a disconnect of mind from body and a preoccupation with advancing the interest of the normative rational, white, Christian human.

Murris (2016) eloquently captures the issue at hand:

substance ontology of Western philosophy thrives on the power producing Nature-Culture dichotomy, [*it*] has caused asymmetrical violence, infiltrated everyday language, … produced hierarchical categories and classifications, and underpins colonialism and colonizing notions of relationships – not only between humans and sub-humans [*e.g., child*] but also between humans and more-than-humans [*e.g., animals, matter*] (p. 2)

In response, posthumanism argues for denouncing human ontological primacy (Osgood & Giugni 2015), favouring conceptions of an ethically embodied experience, of an ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad 2010) – one that decentres humans as object and subject of all endeavour. Posthumanism urges us to recognise the entangled, porous relationship between humans, animals and (technological) machines – creating opportunities for reimagining how we might engage with the world – invoking a relational ontology.

Critical posthumanism cautions though, about over-universalising human experience given the ontological unevenness of what it means to be human, as reflected in the prosopography of those denied and yet to experience full humanity – that is, the lived experience of the colonised, the indigenous and LGBTQI subjects (see Braidotti 2019; Herbrechter & Callus 2018).

Murris' provocation as it relates to historical and contemporary conceptualisations of child might well be regarded as somewhat 'radical' and even inconceivable in the light of extant humanist scholarship that argues that learning begins at birth and must be age-appropriate (Ebrahim, Seleti & Dawes 2013). As such scholarship on early childhood education remains ensconced within a humanist framing (see Ebrahim 2011, 2014, Harrison 2020, Richter et al. 2019), with child remaining within the realm of 'missing peoples' (Murris 2020a). Internationally though, early childhood education has, in fact, initiated boundary-pushing posthumanist scholarship (Somerville 2020) in the area of early literacy (see Lin & Li 2021 for a review of emerging literature). Sjogren's review of the Anthropocene in early childhood education (Sjögren 2023) as well as push-back studies on anthropocentric theoretical canons like Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Elliott & Davis 2020) are clear indications that disruptions in conceptions of childhood education are indeed gaining momentum. There has been a proliferation of promising scholarship that takes a distinctively postanthropocentric approach to childhood studies (Malone, Tesar & Arndt 2020a, 2020b), marking what is described as the ontological turn in childhood studies (Spyrou 2019), including studies that contest established traditions such as Montessori-framed childhood education (Osgood & Mohandas 2022).

As the human person is central to (current) understandings of curriculum development, we next turn to posthuman subjectivity as it stretches existing ways of thinking about what it means to be an adult or child. Disidentification with humanism can benefit from the (re)configuration of

(posthuman) subjectivity and the (re)configuration of ethics alongside immanent lines of flight. Braidotti argues that in the posthuman condition, subjectivity must be (re)configured alongside ecological lines to express our shared intimacy with the world and the more-than-human-world (Braidotti 2022). This kind of subjectivity rejects any dualisms or universalisms and functions on a nature–culture continuum (Braidotti 2016). Posthumanism invites 'humanist programmed individuals' to (re)configure subjectivity as embedded, embodied, extended and enacted becoming(s). This, together with the dissipation of dualisms that challenge adult–child relations, requires a quantum leap in our sense-making of traditional and often highly problematic conceptions of childhood. The child can no longer be viewed as an empty vessel to be filled with abstract content, and the adult can no longer be construed as the all-knowing person. Earlier we posed that the decolonial project might be in danger, or paralysed, should humans not critically engage with humanism and the colonising fetters thereof (Axiom 2). Posthuman subjectivity opens pathways that enable humans to extend their ways of knowing, doing and becoming. This in itself might take the decolonial project to a more nuanced level (to avoid decolonial-washing) and unearth its unhealthy relationship with (Western) humanism. Braidotti (2011:317) states: 'Ethics is a thin barrier against the possibility of extinction. It is a mode of actualizing sustainable forms of transformation'. This statement holds much promise for curriculum transformation in the direction of decoloniality, in all school and postschool spaces (Axiom 1). What it also suggests is that decolonisation is an ethical response ability. Ethics in posthuman terms is not norm-driven, instrumentalist or based on any assumed foundations or predetermined principles. Posthuman ethics is immanent and open and always in becoming. Intra-actions of all sorts determine how ethics materialises.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have experimented with posthumanism in relation to curriculum decolonisation debates in the context of early childhood education. In line with the experimental nature of this think-piece and in an attempt to stay true to the posthuman ways of thinking, doing and becoming, we deliberately avoided presenting any determinist, neatly packaged 'implications' for curriculum (development). Our wish is to further open up the debate to include alternative ways of thinking and doing curriculum work in early childhood ecologies.

Race, class and gender hierarchies are proverbial elephants in the academic and scholarship room in South Africa. A phantasmagoric post-race society myth prevails, yet the children that have to live in South African society in which they are expected to carry the burden of their heritage, are likely to be ill-prepared for antagonisms that society might present. How might we imagine a curriculum for young children that engages with the challenges of the Anthropocene, with genesis of identity politics with all its warts, with issues of both black consciousness and white consciousness and with the generational spill-over effects of the burden of

blackness and whiteness? Our view is that critical posthumanism opens a plethora of alternative ways of thinking and doing curriculum work. However, disrupting the hegemony of nature–culture and child–adult dualisms is likely to prove indefeasible.

Acknowledgements

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