Recentring Culture and Inclusion in African Educational Development and Transformation

Nomanesi Madikizela-Madiya
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4629-2913
University of South Africa
madiyn@unisa.ac.za

John Kibwage Nyangaresi
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5940-3080
University of South Africa
johnnyangaresi1992@gmail.com

The *International Journal of Educational Development in Africa* (IJEDA) was founded on a clear conviction: education on this continent must be understood and transformed from within African histories, languages, epistemologies and struggles. We actively seek work that is African-centred and decolonial in orientation, that takes intersectionality seriously, and that treats education not as a neutral service but as a terrain on which questions of power, justice and development are constantly contested. The contributions in this volume continue that project. They remind us that educational development and transformation are never only a technical matter of curricula, funding formulas or delivery mechanisms. They are always about whose knowledge is legitimised, whose cultures and languages are given space, whose bodies and futures are protected, and whose are rendered expendable. The articles gathered here approach that question from different angles and in different sectors, schools, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, universities, writing centres, community and religious institutions, but they speak to one another in important ways.

For the purposes of this editorial, we group the articles under three overlapping concerns. The first cluster explores culture and language, and demonstrates how the creative arts, Indigenous music, African languages, religious traditions and the spatial politics of academic support all shape what and how learners are able to know. The second cluster focuses on inclusion and inequality, and examines how race, gender, disability, poverty and pedagogical practice structure who participates in education and with what outcomes. The final cluster turns to policy-driven development and professional learning, and asks how e-learning strategies, recognition of prior learning, and other policy instruments can either open or close possibilities for more just and context-sensitive practice. These contributions invite us to reconsider what transformation in African education might entail, and what it would take to move from rhetorical commitment to substantive change.

Culture, Language and the Spaces of Knowledge

The first group of articles foregrounds the centrality of culture, language and space in shaping educational development. These contributions remind us that education is not only a technical or administrative endeavour; it is also a cultural process rooted in identity, memory and contested epistemologies. In their article, "Harmonising Diversity: A Descriptive Analysis of Connecting Children in South Africa through Creative Arts Education," Sakhiseni Joseph Yende and Thelma Mort indicate how creative arts education can connect children across cultural and linguistic differences. They argue that creative arts, when properly resourced and thoughtfully integrated into the curriculum, can foster cultural understanding, social cohesion and a sense of shared national belonging in a deeply diverse society. Creative arts education here is not treated as an optional enrichment activity, but as a crucial medium through which children learn to see themselves and one another as part of a common project.

Benjamin Obeghare Izu, in "Policy Gaps and Opportunities for Integrating Indigenous Music into South African Higher Education Curricula", examines another facet of culture and knowledge. He exposes the distance between policy rhetoric and practice, and indicates that, although national frameworks gesture towards transformation and Indigenous knowledge systems, they lack concrete curriculum mandates, sustainable funding and participatory mechanisms through which Indigenous music can be meaningfully embedded in university programmes. The article calls for coherent policy work that moves beyond symbolic recognition to practical support, and for universities to work closely with Indigenous cultural practitioners whose knowledge is often cited but rarely centred.

The politics of language and space are also foregrounded in "The Politics of Space in South African Writing Centres: Whose Knowledge is Centred?" by Lutendo Nendauni. Here, university writing centres, often assumed to be neutral support sites, are revealed as non-innocent spaces in which English and Western academic norms are privileged. At the same time, Nendauni demonstrates that students and tutors generate moments of resistance, hybridity and creativity through translanguaging, code-switching and the integration of Indigenous knowledge. On this basis, the article proposes context-specific strategies for reimagining writing centre spaces, tutor training and multilingual practices to support greater epistemic justice in postcolonial higher education.

Culture also appears as a barrier to educational participation in "Exploring the Socio-Cultural Drivers of Early Marriage in Zimbabwe: A Qualitative Study of Community Perceptions and Attitudes" by Stanley Makuvaza. Through interviews and focus groups, Makuvaza demonstrates how early marriage is often justified as a means to protect girls' moral standing, secure their financial stability, and comply with traditional gender expectations. In practice, such norms narrow girls' educational and life opportunities. The article calls for community-engaged gender-responsive interventions that promote girls' education, expand their economic opportunities, and challenge restrictive conceptions of respectability and obedience.

In "Teachers' Perspectives of African Languages in Teaching Mathematics: Is There a Place for Sepedi?" Safura Meeran and Piera Biccard bring the language question into the mathematics classroom. They indicate that English, introduced as the language of learning and teaching from Grade 4, frequently acts as a barrier to understanding, even as it is associated with future mobility and cultural capital. Teachers respond by code-switching and drawing on Sepedi to support learners, but broader policy questions about the rightful place of African languages in conceptual learning and the accumulation of cultural capital remain unresolved.

Pedro Mzileni's article, "Neoliberal Debt Culture in Global Higher Education," situates African universities within the broader political–economic context. He argues that both direct underfunding and indirect austerity measures drive public universities into debt and market-oriented practices that erode their public, developmental and critical functions. The article urges a return to the "original and liberating promise" of the university as a public institution oriented towards social justice rather than competitive financial survival.

Finally, in "Comparative Analysis of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Islamic Educational Practices and Transmission: The Traditional Mahdarah in Mauritania", Shoayb Ahmed offers a compelling example of Indigenous and Islamic epistemologies in productive dialogue. By tracing how the mahdarah combines Indigenous knowledge systems and Islamic educational practices through oral transmission, memorisation, storytelling and experiential learning, Ahmed demonstrates the durability and relevance of community-rooted educational models. The article invites contemporary systems to take seriously the pedagogical resources embedded in African and Islamic intellectual histories.

Collectively, these contributions reveal the numerous ways in which culture, language and the organisation of educational spaces shape who is able to learn, what kinds of knowledge are legitimised and how educational development is imagined on the continent.

Inclusion, Inequality and Humanising Practices

The second cluster addresses who is enabled to participate and succeed in African education systems, and on what terms. The focus moves from deaf learners navigating systems not designed for them, to racial and gendered patterns in school completion, and finally to attempts to re-humanise pedagogy in highly constrained TVET environments.

In their article, "Increasing Participation in Education of Deaf Learners in South Africa and Zimbabwe," Patrick Sibanda and Lloyd D. N. Tlale adopt the social model of disability and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to frame deafness as a positive form of diversity and a cultural–linguistic identity rather than a deficit. Against this backdrop, they review the literature and policy frameworks on deaf education, demonstrating that,

despite constitutional and legislative commitments, deaf learners continue to face structural disadvantages. Teachers frequently lack fluency in national sign languages, interpreting services are uneven, and curricula, assessments and school cultures are built around hearing norms. Sibanda and Tlale argue for sign bilingual education and for the substantive involvement of Deaf communities in designing and implementing educational responses, recognising that inclusion requires both linguistic rights and a redistribution of authority over knowledge and pedagogy.

In "Racial and Gender-Based Inequality in School Completion in South Africa: An Expression of Socioeconomic Disparity", Viome Showers and Philomene Nsengiyumva draw on nationally representative General Household Survey data from 2015 to 2019 to document persistent disparities in upper-secondary school completion. Their analysis indicates that Black and Coloured youths continue to complete secondary school at substantially lower rates than their White and Indian/Asian peers. Although girls generally outperform boys in completion rates, gender interacts with race and socio-economic position in complex ways, producing differentiated risks of non-completion. The authors interpret these patterns as expressions of deeper socio-economic disparities rooted in the spatial and structural legacies of apartheid, which are sustained by uneven school quality and household poverty. They call for targeted interventions, improved school resourcing and focused support in communities and districts with the lowest completion rates if education is to serve as a route out of inherited inequality rather than a mirror of it.

Where Sibanda and Tlale foreground disability, and Showers and Nsengiyumva foreground race and gender, Ezekiel Majola and Makhosi Madimabe-Mofokeng's article, "Exploring Traces of Humanising Pedagogy in South African TVET Colleges: A Transformative Approach," turns to pedagogy in South Africa's TVET colleges. Working with a Freirean understanding of humanising pedagogy, Majola and Madimabe-Mofokeng explore the perspectives of lecturers and students in two Eastern Cape colleges. The participants described a strong desire for dialogical, respectful, student-centred teaching that recognises learners' lived realities and encourages critical engagement. At the same time, they reported daily realities shaped by rigid, audit-driven curricula, large classes, heavy workloads and limited professional development. Under such conditions, attempts at humanising pedagogy appear as fragile pockets of innovation rather than systemic norms. The authors argue that genuine inclusion in TVET will require institutional and policy reforms that create the time, space and support necessary for reflective practice, multilingual and participatory methods, and greater student agency in shaping learning.

These contributions make a crucial point: inclusion in African education is not only about getting more learners through the door; it is also about ensuring that they are supported and engaged throughout their educational journey. It is about recognising and valuing students' languages, bodies, identities and voices in everyday educational

practice, and about confronting the structural conditions of disability, race, gender and institutional design that determine who is able to flourish once inside the system.

Policy, Professional Development and Social Development

The final group of articles turns our attention to the systemic levers that shape what is possible in classrooms and lecture halls: policies, funding and professional development. If earlier contributions foreground culture and pedagogy, these articles remind us that even the most committed practitioners work within policy and organisational frames that can either enable or suffocate meaningful change. In "Barriers to Recognition of Prior Learning for Sector Education and Training Authority-Accredited Providers in Gauteng", Geoffrey Pinagase Tshephe and Nathaniel Govender explore a mechanism that is often celebrated in policy as a cornerstone of redress. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is designed to acknowledge the experiential learning of adults who have acquired skills outside formal education, and to open pathways into qualifications and further development for those who have been historically excluded from the system. Through a qualitative phenomenological study with accredited providers, the authors identify five main barriers: the technical complexity of RPL processes, a shortage of practitioners with specialised RPL expertise, weak internal management and coordination, financial constraints, and limited awareness, capacity-building and advocacy among key stakeholders. As a result, RPL is often perceived as a costly and administratively burdensome add-on rather than as an integrated instrument of social justice. The authors argue for clearer national and institutional frameworks, targeted capacity development and sustainable funding if RPL is to fulfil its promise.

Mpho-Entle Puleng Modise's article, "The Role of E-Learning Policy in Academics' Professional Development in African ODeL Institutions," offers a parallel reflection on policy and professional learning. Focusing on two large open-distance e-learning universities, Modise examines how institutional e-learning policies shape academics' readiness and capacity to teach online. When policies are comprehensive, current and explicit about staff development, they can act as real drivers of training, support and innovation. Under such conditions, academics are more likely to receive structured opportunities to develop the pedagogical and technological skills necessary for effective online engagement with students. By contrast, if e-learning policies are outdated, vague or silent on professional development, training tends to be ad hoc and uneven, and academics are left to cope individually with the demands of digital transformation. Modise concludes that ODeL institutions in developing countries should treat e-learning policy as a living development strategy, subject to regular review and tightly aligned with concrete programmes for lecturer capacity-building, infrastructural investment and student support.

Read together, these articles underscore that transformation in African education cannot be left to individual goodwill at the classroom level. Enabling policies, adequate and predictable resources, and supportive institutional structures are crucial if inclusive,

context-sensitive practices are to take root and endure. Without such scaffolding, promising ideas, whether RPL, online learning, humanising pedagogy or Indigenous knowledge integration, risk remaining at the level of experiment and rhetoric rather than becoming part of the fabric of educational development on the continent.

Concluding Reflections

Across its different lenses and levels, this volume highlights three interlocking concerns. The first is culture and language, as both a resource and a risk. Creative arts, Indigenous music, African languages, religious traditions and the everyday spatial politics of writing centres and classrooms all carry powerful possibilities for connection, meaning-making and epistemic justice, but they can also be mobilised to restrict girls' futures, marginalise deaf learners, or privilege English and Western norms over African ones (Ahmed; Izu; Makuvaza; Meeran and Biccard; Nendauni; Yende and Mort). The second is inclusion and inequality, who is recognised and who is left out. The articles on deaf education, racial and gendered completion gaps, early marriage and humanising pedagogy in TVET all indicate that access, on its own, does not guarantee participation, dignity or success (Majola and Madimabe-Mofokeng; Makuvaza; Showers and Nsengiyumva; Sibanda and Tlale). The third is policy and professional development, how the best of our intentions are, or are not, translated into practice through funding decisions, institutional arrangements, e-learning strategies and RPL frameworks (Modise; Tshephe and Govender).

The contributions offer both critique and proposal. They critique debt-driven university models, policy gaps in Indigenous knowledges, exclusionary spaces and harmful cultural norms (Ahmed; Izu; Makuvaza; Mzileni; Nendauni). At the same time, they propose concrete ways forward: arts education for cohesion; the curricularisation of Indigenous music; sign bilingual education; humanising pedagogies in TVET; more just RPL and e-learning policies; and the integration of longstanding Indigenous and Islamic educational practices into contemporary systems (Ahmed; Majola and Madimabe-Mofokeng; Modise; Sibanda and Tlale; Tshephe and Govender; Yende and Mort). If education is to contribute meaningfully to African development and transformation, it will need to be transformative, culturally grounded and inclusive rather than merely efficient or expanded. The articles in this issue do not provide simple answers, but they do offer rich ideas, evidence and practices that can help to move the continent's educational debates and institutions in that direction.