

# **A Critical Self-reflection on Theorising Education Development as ‘Epistemological Access’ to ‘Powerful Knowledge’**

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## **Abstract**

This paper is a critical self-reflective piece located in the context of South African Higher education post the student protests of 2015 - 2017. The paper is motivated by the insight that ‘epistemic decolonisation’ involves exposing ‘the hidden complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality’ (Mignolo 2010: 313). My argument is located in the contradiction between modernity and coloniality which I suggest structurally conditions the experience of black students in Education Development Programmes (EDPs) in historically white universities. The key argument is that when the theoretical concepts ‘epistemological access’ to ‘powerful knowledge’ are taken up from the social realist school in the metropolises and applied to the context of Education Development (ED) in post-colonial universities, their ontological assumptions and the normative effects exacerbate the modernity/ coloniality contradiction. I go on to speculate on what a decolonial critique of the application of these two concepts to ED might entail. I conclude by thinking through some of the implications of this reflection for the challenging task of reconceptualising an undergraduate curriculum for HE in SA.

**Keywords:** Education/ Academic development, South African higher education, decolonisation, Social Realist school of Sociology of Education, curriculum studies, curriculum knowledge

It seems to me that the philosophical choice confronting us today is the following. We have to opt either for a critical philosophy which appears as an analytical philosophy of truth in general, or for a critical thought which takes the form of an ontology of ourselves, of present reality (Michel Foucault [1982/1983] 2010: 21).

## **Introduction**

This article is a self-reflective piece located in the context of South African Higher education post the student protests of 2015 - 2017. The student movements critiqued historically white universities for the racism and 'whiteness' of their institutional cultures and for the Eurocentrism of their curricula – which students demanded should be 'decolonised'. In response, a 'decolonial turn' in the South African literature on higher education (HE) has started to debate how the students' call should be taken up in university curricula (Heleta 2016; Mbembe 2016; Le Grange 2016; Fataar 2018; Curriculum Change Framework UCT, 2018). The focus of this paper is to think through the implications of the 'decolonial turn' for undergraduate education in South African higher education, but in particular I will argue that separate Extended Curriculum or Extended Degree Programmes<sup>1</sup> are no longer tenable post the student protests.

When RMF students first began to protest at UCT, they released a list of 'long-term goals' (RMF 2015). They called for the university to 'Introduce a curriculum and research scholarship linked to social justice and the experiences of black people' (Goal 10) and to 'Improve academic support programs' (Goal 11). The fourth goal was more explicit about the curriculum, 'Implement a curriculum which critically centres Africa and the subaltern'.

By this we mean treating African discourses as the point of departure – through addressing not only content, but languages and methodologies of education and learning – and only examining western traditions in so far as they are relevant to our own experience (RMF 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper Education Development refers to 'foundation provision' that in South African HE is offered to selected students placed on separate Extended Curriculum or Extended Degree Programmes.

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A legitimate response to these demands is to insist on the distinction between experience and knowledge and to argue that the higher education curriculum should not be limited to that which is relevant to students' life experiences and contexts. However, the point of this paper is to rather hear the sense of exclusion and longing for recognition and social justice in the student demands and to understand that they speak from subject positions that still feel colonised. The students that I teach are caught in a 'double bind' that traps them in assimilating to Western ways; they desire modernity and its promises of employment and material comfort, but because they are positioned as in need of remedial treatment, they can only access the qualifications that promise access to modernity via the baggage and humiliation of coloniality (discussed below). It is from this position that I turn a critical gaze on ED practice<sup>2</sup> and the institutionalised curriculum<sup>3</sup> that it serves. In particular, I interrogate a pair of theoretical concepts, 'epistemological access' to 'powerful knowledge' which, I will argue, have served to legitimate hegemonic and assimilationist assumptions.

In my view, the protests have opened-up a fault-line or a 'line of fragility' (Foucault cited in Allen 2016:184) in the constitution of the modern/colonial South Africa university, particularly in the historically white research-intensive universities where the protests first erupted. I believe we could use this moment as an opportunity for critical self-reflection, for exercising humility, for unlearning what we thought we knew. Especially for white people in South Africa, like myself, this involves a self-critique of the social institutions, events, practices, subject formations and normative commitments that have led us to constitute ourselves and others as we have. This is not easy, for we have to recognize that even our normative commitments are made within lifeworld horizons that are justified relative to a set of contextually salient values – that is, in contingent socio-historical contexts (Allen 2016). For these reasons, the context and position from which I write is crucial to the argument of the paper – a white female academic working in an Education Development Programme (EDP) in a Humanities Faculty at the University of Cape Town, where the #RhodesMustFall protests began 2015.

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to foundational provision taught on separate 4-year Extended Curriculum/ Degree Programmes.

<sup>3</sup> This refers to the mainstream undergraduate curriculum taught on 3-year degree programmes.

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## *Development as ‘Epistemological Access’ to ‘Powerful Knowledge’*

This context is important because the argument of the paper is deliberately located in the contradiction between modernity and coloniality which I argue structurally conditions the experience of black students in Education Development Programmes (EDPs) in historically white universities (HWUs) – a contradiction that persists to the present. My key argument in the paper is that when the theoretical concepts ‘epistemological access’ to ‘powerful knowledge’ are taken up<sup>4</sup> and applied to this particular context of Education Development in a post-colonial university, the ontological assumptions and normative effects of the modernity/ coloniality contradiction are exacerbated.

The paper is structured as follows. *Firstly*, I undertake a selective reconstruction of the ED project in the light of current criticisms against it launched from a decolonial platform. Instead of framing it as a liberal anti-apartheid project motivated by a concern for equity and social justice, I reframe it as a modernising project within a developmentalist paradigm. *Secondly*, I link the modernising impulse of the developmentalist paradigm with the decolonial theorists’ concept of modernity/ coloniality. *Thirdly* I locate the work of Basil Bernstein in its original context and discuss how it has been taken up in a different time and place in South African ED work. Since the 2000s this approach to ED work has emphasized two key concepts – ‘epistemological access’ to ‘powerful knowledge’ – and it is the take up of these two concepts that are the focus of this paper. *Fourthly* I speculate on what a decolonial critique of these two concepts might entail. *Finally*, I conclude by thinking through what some of the implications of this reflection might be for the challenging task of reconceptualising an undergraduate curriculum for HE in SA and other post-colonial contexts.

### **A Selective Account of Education Development in South African Historically White Universities**

In the early 1980s, the apartheid regime started to fracture –racial-capitalism was resisted at home and isolated internationally. In response, the regime, encouraged by business, accepted the idea of allowing a black middle class to

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<sup>4</sup> These concepts are based on the work of Basil Bernstein but have been developed by his followers in what is sometimes referred to as a Social Realist school of Sociology of Education.

develop in restricted ways in white urban areas. This resulted in the opening-up of HWUs controlled through a quota system. ED thus began in the 1980s in HWUs as an anti-apartheid humanist project – to get the best black students, casualties of the Bantu Education system, into so-called ‘world-class’ white universities – to support them to succeed. It was argued by those in HWUs that access to the white university would become a ‘revolving door’ unless some kind of ‘catch-up’ curricular provision was made for black students from a chronically inadequate public schooling system (Bouhey 2007; McKenna 2003). Initially Academic Support Programmes (ASPs) and later Education Development Programmes (EDPs) or Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs), were established to assist small numbers of ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘under-prepared’ (euphemisms for black) students with university study; their participation in EDPs being a condition of their admission on lower entry points<sup>5</sup>.

In the first two decades of its existence, the ED project focused on providing additional support to students on ECPs/ EDPs in their first ‘foundation’ year of study. Students were traditionally placed into separate extended programmes on entry. The programmes usually provide an extra year of study permitting a lighter course load and extra time for developing the academic skills to ‘cope’ with university level study. Over time ED practitioners have worked critically with new theories and empirical data. Thus, since their inception ED interventions have morphed from an add-on study skills approach to the teaching of reading and writing to an academic literacies approach or an academic socialisation or genre approach as identified by Lea and Street (1998). It was only in the early 2000s that a group of ED practitioners, mostly in HWUs, began to work in the Bernsteinian tradition which was at that time influential in leading Schools of Education across South Africa. We later adopted the terms ‘epistemological access’ to ‘powerful knowledge’ to capture the work of inducting entry level students into the discourses and concepts of the disciplines (‘powerful knowledge’) by making their rules, logics and ways of reasoning explicit (‘epistemological access’)

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<sup>5</sup> While it is easy to criticize these initiatives with hindsight and from current postcolonial or decolonial perspectives, it is important to acknowledge that at the time of their origin during apartheid, they were led by committed anti-apartheid activists who challenged the race-based policies of separate development and did what was possible under repressive conditions.

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(for example Luckett & Hunma 2014; Luckett 2016). Since the 2000s, ED has expanded as a field of practice to include policy work, management of teaching and learning, quality assurance, staff development and the roll out of ICTs – to improve teaching and learning (Boughey 2010; Clegg 2009).

Despite its expansion and growing expertise in a range of fields, the ED project's outcomes have been partial and limited. While there is evidence that its contribution as a mechanism of access has been significant, ensuring that 'underprepared' black students gain admission to HWUs, but with some exceptions, EDP completion rates remain unsatisfactory (Council on Higher Education 2015). The initial gains made at the end of first year are lost by the end of years 2, 3 and 4 when students drop out or are academically excluded. The obstacles to academic success that were seemingly removed, re-appear.

Throughout its history there has been a minor stream of policy critique from within the ED community itself (Bradbury & Miller 2011; Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015; Luckett & Shay 2017) but this has largely failed to penetrate national policy frameworks and the Department of Higher Education and Training's funding criteria for state subsidy. As a consequence, the institutional structuring of ED programmes inherited from the apartheid era have remained almost unchanged since their inception. Clegg argues that, despite taking strong normative positions and showing high levels of self-reflexivity in its writings, the South African ED community has always 'struggled to build intellectual and moral legitimacy' (2009:409). She suggests that the reason for this may be that it has failed to critique the institutionalised power of the disciplines, to challenge the norms and assumptions on which the regular curriculum is based and to question the managerialist power on which the ED project depends for its authorization and institutional resource base. In many ways her criticism anticipated the current critique by students drawing on decolonial theory.

## **The Developmentalist Paradigm**

In order to fully grasp the structural contradictions in which the ED project originated and now finds itself, it is necessary to take a big step back and locate it within a much longer historical duree and its social imaginaries. The colonial powers initially supported missionary education endeavours, legitimating their rule through a discourse of improving and 'civilizing the natives' to make them fit for modernity (Kallaway & Swartz 2016). However, by the mid-1800s

uprisings in the colonies and greater control wrested by settler populations put pressure on this humanitarian impulse. It was replaced by a second discourse, based on social Darwinism, that posited a ‘natural’ hierarchy of races based on biological and cultural difference.

In his critique of colonial and post-colonial states, Chatterjee (2011) explains how this worked via what he terms the ‘norm-deviation-exception’ paradigm. Historically the colony was deemed the exception to universal (European) norms on grounds of biological, cultural and moral difference. It was the ‘imperial prerogative’ to declare ‘the colonial exception’. The declaration of an exception opened-up a pedagogical project – in which the imperial power was obliged to take responsibility for educating and disciplining the colonized to bring them up to European norms. Chatterjee’s work shows how this paradigm of measuring the colonized against European norms outlived imperial rule and was taken up in similar ways by post-colonial developmental states.

In the post-colonial era, developmental states continue to adopt this norm-deviation-norm exception strategy, now applying the normative standards of the West to their own population groups, using statistics to show a ‘norm-deviation’ and thus the need for state intervention (Murray Li 2007). This leads to a ‘norm-exception’ paradigm in the policy domain, where certain populations are identified for NPO or state-funded treatments. The developmental state’s instrumental rationality is that this will encourage ‘backward populations’ to modernize (Chatterjee 2011). In fact, this produces deficit, schizophrenic subjects (who live in modern democratic states but are deemed not-yet-ready for exercising sovereignty and full civil liberties). These subjects believe it is in their self-interest to comply with such programmes, thus giving their consent to hegemonic values and power relations. Murray Li (2007) argues that, despite the good intentions of its protagonists, the ‘will to improve’ via developmental projects always falls short of its promises – yet stubbornly persists within given power relations. Developmental projects fail because they do not engage with political questions nor see their intended beneficiaries as political actors with sufficient agency to work out their own solutions to their problems. Murray Li (2007) asserts that from the colonial through to the current neo-liberal era, whenever their expertise is challenged, those who wield ‘the power to improve’, tend to reassert their authority, devising new and better improvement schemes that perpetuate the divide between the developed and undeveloped.

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As noted by Chatterjee (2011), working in India, there is certain irony that post-colonial states often perpetuate the developmental paradigm. For example, in South Africa, the DHET has set up race-based redress and equity projects that require universities to report student performance using the old race-based population groups. At national level, this perennially shows a norm-deviation in graduation rates by students in the black groups. The DHET uses this discrepancy in performance by race to justify its Foundation Grant policy whereby black students are positioned as the exception to the white norm. In order to earn subsidy from the DHET's Foundation Grant (2012) that funds foundational provision, students are admitted to universities on entry points lower than those for the regular 3-year degrees and / or identified via placement tests such as the National Benchmark Tests for placement in separate, administratively identifiable, 4-year extended programmes for the duration of their undergraduate careers. The state funds only the 'additional teaching input' that students receive on such programmes, which must be over and above that provided to 'normal' students on 'mainstream' three-year degrees.

Looking back at the structural formation of the ED project perhaps it was inevitable that the inherited curriculum and performance of privileged white students would be taken as the norm in South African HWUs. As long as black students were seen to deviate from white norms, 'colonial difference' would come to mean 'not good enough' and 'not as good as us', despite the use of euphemisms such as 'disadvantaged' or 'underprepared' intended to locate the 'problem' in the public schooling system and not in the person of the student. Given the racialized 'dispositif' of South African society and the institutionally marginalized status of the ED project, perhaps it was not possible to run an anti-apartheid, humanist and modernizing project that did not also entail 'coloniality' (see below). My argument is that despite the good intentions of its protagonists and the apparent gratitude of its beneficiaries, the good work carried out at agential level has been overshadowed by its structural contradictions. This has been highlighted by the student protestors' use of decolonial theory to inform their critique of HWUs.

### **Relevant Concepts from Decolonial Theory**

The first wave of decolonial writings were associated with political ideologies and anti-colonial struggles (Cesaire 2001; Nkrumah 1970; Nyerere 1968; Fanon 2001; Biko 2010). The second wave, based mostly on the works of Latin



American theorists and drawn on by contemporary South African student movements, poses an epistemological as well as a political challenge to neo-colonialism, or what it terms 'coloniality'. 'Coloniality' refers to 'long-standing patterns of power' that began with the conquest of the Americas in 1492 and defined a new world order that enabled the primitive accumulation of capital in Europe from which Western modernity developed (Maldonado-Torres 2007) – hence the key concept 'modernity/coloniality' (Quijano 2007; Mignolo 2010). In decolonial theory and crucially important for the South African context, the ideology of race and racist practices that involved violence, the destruction and negation and of the bodies, minds and cultures of colonial subjects, are viewed as constitutive of modernity (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013).

Decolonial theorists insist that the legacy of empire endures in the present as 'coloniality', the 'darker side' of modernity. They thus apply the concept 'modernity/ coloniality' to the politics of knowledge production and they see the same patterns of power working to determine who produces knowledge, who owns it and who legitimates it. Gordon (2014) is critical of how historically knowledge has been colonized and centralized by Europe in ways that validated only one form of knowledge, not only de-legitimizing the knowledges of others; but undermining the very conditions for epistemic life (2014: 85). Regarding epistemology, decolonial theorists assert that because the modern disciplines were generated from within the colonial apparatus and power relations, not only the contents of the modern disciplines, but also their foundational epistemic assumptions must be interrogated (Escobar 2002; Grosfoguel 2008; Mignolo 2011). They assert that there is no autonomous universal subject of knowledge (in truth based on the consciousness of a Eurocentric, propertied, white male). They point out how the western episteme has been institutionalised and universalized through the modern university system, the modern disciplines and through the five hegemonic (ex-colonial) European languages (Grosfoguel 2013, 74). Insisting instead that modernity is plural and not the sole property of Europe, they claim that Eurocentricism is based on 'confusion between abstract universality and concrete world hegemony derived from Europe's position as centre' (Mignolo 2010: 317). Furthermore, this domination of European thought has led to the 'developmentalist fallacy' (the assumption that all nations and epistemologies must follow Europe's path of development) (Dussel 2000: 471 cited in Escobar 2010: 38). 'Epistemic de-colonization' then involves exposing 'the hidden complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality'

(Mignolo 2010:313).

In contrast decolonial theorists view all knowledge as situated and embodied (including modern Western epistemologies). They promote an openness to all forms of knowledge, especially the recognition and restoration of subjugated people as subjects of knowledge. They emphasise the importance of knowledge being relevant to and contextualized within the lifeworlds of its knowers. Some advocate that knowledge production in the Social Sciences should begin with the contradictions of the lived experiences of subjugated peoples (Gordon 2014).

This selective account of decolonial theory suggests that a decolonial critique of the ED project in South African HWUs, would view it as a typically Eurocentric, modernizing project that takes the Western episteme, its disciplines and the hegemony of the English language as universal and unquestioned – thus structurally reproducing relations of coloniality. I now return to my account of ED practice to show how a particular appropriation of concepts from the Bernsteinian school has served to exacerbate this contradiction or 'double bind' of 'modernity/ coloniality' experienced by many black students on ED programmes in South African HWUs.

### **Basil Bernstein's Context and Project**

Bernstein was a British academic who set out to explain how power relations in society translate into discursive practices in schools that work to disadvantage working class pupils and advantage middle-class pupils. He originally developed the 'pedagogic device' as a conceptual framework to explain how the modern education system in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s had a structural tendency to reproduce social inequality. His work is a class-based, Neo-Marxist, structuralist analysis based on a realist ontology that seeks to uncover hidden macro-structures (such as external class structures and internal semantic codes) that are causal and can be observed or experienced by their effects on micro-practices in classrooms and education systems more broadly. Bernstein was a subtle thinker, whose work is not always fully appreciated by either his protagonists or antagonists. He warned not to reduce education systems to sites of social pathology, arguing instead that they have their own internal logics which he set out to model in the pedagogic device (Bernstein 2000).

Bernstein's work has subsequently been taken up and elaborated by a

‘social realist’ school (the SR school) of the Sociology of Education<sup>6</sup> (for example Muller 2000; 2012; Young 2008; Muller & Young 2014; Wheelahan 2010; Maton & Moore 2010; Moore 2013; Maton 2014) to hold onto a notion of knowledge as structured by a world that is ontologically independent from what we know about it. The SR school advocates a realist position in order to defend the disciplines and the curriculum from perceived threats originating in the social sciences such as constructivism, standpoint theory, the ‘discursive turn’, the ‘ontological turn’, the ‘reflexive turn’ or ‘the decolonial turn’ – which are understood to relativize epistemology and reduce knowledge to its social relations. Given its time and context, Bernstein’s work was firmly located in a modernizing paradigm and did not take coloniality into account. Unsurprisingly the neo-Marxists categories of ‘working class’ and ‘middle class’ do not apply straightforwardly to the South African social formation or its contemporary HE system. They exclude numerous other structures with causal power such as race, language, gender, school type/ quintile, geographic location. I turn next to discuss how his theories have been taken up by myself and others in pockets of ED research and practice in HWUs (see for example Lockett 2009; 2014; 2016; 2018).

### **The Take-up of ‘Epistemological Access’ to ‘Powerful Knowledge’ by Some ED Practitioners**

In South Africa, Bernstein’s theory has been far more thoroughly researched and applied to curriculum and pedagogic research by those working on schooling where it has made important policy interventions (see Muller 2000; Ensor 2003; Hoadley 2008; Hugo & Wedekind 2013). In ED, where the focus is on preparing first-year students to access the disciplines, a narrower focus has been adopted that analyzes objectified structures of curriculum knowledge with a view to informing curriculum design and pedagogic practice in both the regular and EDPs – aiming to give students ‘epistemological access’ to the target disciplinary knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup> It is important not to confuse the Social Realist school in the Sociology of Education based on the work of Basil Bernstein, with the Social Realist school in Sociology led by Margaret Archer, and others, working mostly in the discipline of Sociology. The latter build on and apply the theory of critical realist philosopher, Roy Bhaskar, to analyses of society.

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The now commonplace phrase 'epistemological access', was first coined in South Africa by Morrow (2009) at UWC in the early 1990s to distinguish between formal admission to an institution and access to the forms and ways of thinking in the disciplines. The term was introduced, in contradistinction to 'formal access', to capture the need for academics (not ED practitioners)<sup>7</sup> to make explicit for students the specific demands, the 'grammars of inquiry' and the 'epistemic values' of their disciplines. It was only in the early 2000s that the term was appropriated to apply to ED work and given explicit theoretical content by those working in the Bernsteinian tradition (see below).

Following Morrow (2009) and Muller (2012), the concept 'epistemological access' became paired with Young's (2008) term 'powerful knowledge' – the latter refers to the disciplines, objectified as 'knowledge structures'. Young (2008) defines 'powerful knowledge' as specialised knowledge, developed and verified by disciplinary communities of enquiry according to transparent epistemic rules and a certain 'sociality of knowledge' ('truth as agreement'). The SR school emphasizes the importance of 'bringing knowledge back in', arguing for the importance of recovering knowledge as object with its own causal powers and properties and internal logics; that is, according knowledge an ontologically real status relatively independent of its knowers. Knowledge practices are viewed as emergent from but irreducible to their contexts of production.

Young's definition locates the concept of 'powerful knowledge' firmly in the disciplines; the assumption is that it is this institutionalized knowledge that is the best currently available to all of humanity and to which, therefore, access should be democratized. Furthermore, it is (only) in the disciplines that we can find the theory, methods and procedures for verifying knowledge claims – against which all forms of knowledge can and should be judged.

Although Bernstein himself did not use the term 'powerful knowledge', (he used 'vertical discourses'), his late sketchy work on 'knowledge structures' has generated a set of new concepts for analyzing 'powerful knowledge' (Young 2008; Wheelahan 2010; Young & Muller 2014). This body of work and also Maton's (2014) Legitimation Code Theory, provides conceptual and methodological tools for analyzing knowledge structures in ways that capture the differentiated nature of knowledge in the

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<sup>7</sup> Aslam Fataar, personal communication, 30/10/2018.

disciplines and professional fields with a view to informing curriculum design – especially the selection, sequencing and conceptual coherence of curriculum knowledge (for example Lockett 2009; Lockett & Hunma 2014). The integrity of a knowledge structure, it is argued, needs to be retained in curriculum design to enable students to build knowledge cumulatively and progress vertically up a curriculum spine – with a preference for moving from concrete to more abstract forms of knowledge (Muller 2009). Key concepts used are the specialization of knowledge and knowers, semantic density and gravity etc. The methodology is adapted from Bernstein’s concepts classification and framing, which involves analyzing the relative strengths of boundaries between categories. Bernstein’s penchant for setting up dualistic analytical categories is used to highlight differences, contrasts and tensions between different knowledge structures in order to improve curriculum design. This approach, based on the assumption that modern/ Western disciplinary knowledge is universally powerful, opens up a modernizing pedagogical project that aims to use analyses of curriculum knowledge to enhance students’ ‘epistemological access’ to that knowledge.

Within the theoretical framework of the SR school and when applied to the ED project, the meaning of Morrow’s phrase ‘epistemological access’ (now to ‘powerful knowledge’) was filled with new content. It became linked to Bernstein’s concept of a ‘visible pedagogy’, used to make explicit the cognitive and discursive demands of learning, reading and writing in the ‘elaborated codes’ (the disciplinary discourses) in higher education (see for example Lockett 2016). Moore (2013) re-interpreted Bernstein’s ‘vertical discourse’ as esoteric, cryptic codes that are relatively independent of their originating contexts. He explains that in order to abstract and generalize; meanings become increasingly specialized, semantically dense and removed from their everyday contexts. It is thus understood that good pedagogic practice elaborates or unpacks these condensed meanings so that students can access their ways of reasoning, reading and writing – and eventually learn to move fluently between the concrete and the abstract in their own writing.

In a recent stock-take of the ED project, Vorster and Quinn (2017) identify four discourses and related hegemonic concepts that they claim have informed the work of ED in South African universities. These are the facilitation of ‘epistemological access’ to the disciplines for a diversity of students; respect for the disciplinary expertise and identities of academics – closely linked to the concept of ‘powerful knowledge’; the concept of critical

reflexive practitioners and a commitment to working with 'strong theory'. They go on to suggest that particularly the notion of facilitating 'epistemological access' to 'powerful knowledge' has been used problematically in 'assimilationist and exclusionary ways' in education development discourse and practice (Vorster & Quinn 2017:42). In the next section, I respond to Vorster and Quinn's challenge and, as a form of self-critique, think through what a decolonial critique of this approach to ED work looks like – especially when used in ED programmes located in a two-track curriculum structure that works to perpetuate a developmentalist paradigm.

## **Re-reading 'Epistemological Access' to 'Powerful Knowledge' through a Decolonial Lens**

Whether one subscribes to the decolonial position or not, given its resonance with black students, many of whom are on EDPS, it is important to understand their critique of Western epistemologies and universities. So, what might a decolonial critique of the notion of 'epistemological access' to 'powerful knowledge' look like?

*Firstly*, as noted above, the naturalization of its universal claims and assumptions would be questioned; including the taken-for-granted power of the disciplines as institutions of modernity. It would be pointed out how the assumed universal reach of 'powerful' knowledge claims excludes other forms of knowledge and knowers and, in post-colonial contexts, perpetuates the power relations of coloniality.

*Secondly*, Bernsteinian theory's reinforcement of 'strong boundaries' to constitute and preserve specialised abstract knowledge would be critiqued by the decolonialists for excluding other forms of knowledge. They would call for a weakening of the classification and framing around both knowledge and knowers. They want to open up the West's control of symbolic space, letting in other kinds of knowers and legitimating knowledge produced from other spaces. This promotion of non-hegemonic hitherto silenced counter-discourses is understood as a liberatory project that will produce alternatives to Eurocentric universalism, challenging its modernist logic of progress and development and its grand narratives based on the ideologies of Christianity, liberalism or Marxism. More specifically the decolonialists call for new ways of thinking from 'the other side of colonial difference' (Escobar 2010); they

want to delink from (rather than assimilate into) Western hegemony. They call for an ‘epistemic shift’ that changes the terms of the conversation and provides new spaces to think from. By shifting the ‘geo-politics’ and the ‘body-politics’ of knowledge production from the North to the South and from ‘a white male consciousness’ to that of the damne, they believe that an-other rationality will emerge culminating in ‘pluriversality’ (Mignolo 2007) or ‘transmodernity’ (Escobar 2010).

*Thirdly*, the SR school’s privileging and reification of abstract context-independent theory over contextualized practice and relatedly of ‘epistemological access’ over social or ontological access and would also be challenged by decolonial scholars. As feminist and decolonial scholars have long pointed out, the privileging of epistemology over ontology, mind over body, reason over affect is typical of Western thought and works to exclude ‘others’ and other ways of knowing.

This leads to a *fourth critique*, that of dualistic thinking. The endemic dualisms in Western social science theory have long been problematised by feminist and postcolonial scholars, for example male / female, subject / object, mind / body, theory / practice, fact / value, society / individual, structure / agency, sacred / profane, modern / traditional, and so on. Of course, making distinctions and thinking with dualisms is a fundamental way of making meaning in all semiotic systems, such that the use of dualistic patterns for distinguishing differences that make a difference can be seen to repeat fractally both within and between concepts as they develop (Abbott 2001). Bernsteinian discourse has a penchant for setting up its concepts in strong oppositional dualisms. Examples include strong / weak classification and framing, elaborated / restricted codes, vertical / horizontal discourse, instructional / regulative discourse, vertical / horizontal knowledge structures, epistemic / social relations and more recently epistemological access / formal or social access.

One could argue that these are useful analytical tools, but the problem arises when these dualisms are reified and imposed on ED pedagogy in practice. Furthermore, typical of dualistic thinking in general, is the tendency for normative judgements to coalesce around a ‘good’ pole versus a ‘bad’ pole. One of the binaries gets privileged, foregrounded and normatively valued, while the other is backgrounded and negated. Whether intended or not, this happens in Bernsteinian and SR school discourse. In post-colonial contexts and, more specifically within a developmentalist paradigm, this dualistic

thinking inevitably ends up valuing what is modern, Western and 'global' and devaluing what is local, indigenous and Southern. In particular, decolonial scholars critique the subject/ object dualism whereby Western epistemology's knowing subject is abstracted from the world s/he is perceiving and observing. That said, decolonial theory itself is not immune from dualistic thinking, but it flips the script, for example it wants to privilege colonized /colonizer; practice/ theory; local/ global; the rest/ West /; the South / the North and so on. Others such as Mignolo (2013) are more sophisticated, he specifically states that his teleological vision for a 'pluriversity' 'is not one of cultural relativism, but the 'entanglement of several cosmologies connected today in a power differential' (2013: 147). He calls for thinking from within this entanglement.

My overall argument here is that the theory-building of the SR school is a typical instance of Western epistemology applied to education. For example, it makes universal claims, protects the institutionalised power of the disciplines, maintains strong boundaries between institutionalized knowledge and other forms of knowledge and works with dualisms. In ED work and more broadly in a post-colonial context, these epistemological positions can work to objectify curriculum knowledge and its structures in ways that background social relations and ontological conditions and so work to exclude 'others'.

A response from the social realist school to the decolonial critique would be likely to challenge their theory of knowledge. While accepting that the social identity of knowers is salient to knowledge production and epistemic judgement, social realists argue that social identity on its own is insufficient grounds for making or attributing a knowledge claim (Maton 2014; Maton & Moore 2010). The social realists believe it is reductionist to limit knowledge production to the interests of its knowers; we should not reduce standards and criteria for knowledge (and for determining the curriculum) to the social interests of certain groups. Further, they argue that relevance and experience are inadequate bases for determining what knowledge should be selected for a curriculum; that such curricula ultimately short-change students who may not get adequate access to 'powerful' disciplinary knowledge.

A more measured way through the debate set up here between the SR school and the decolonial theorists is suggested by feminist philosopher Louise Alcoff (2011). She writes in support of the 'decolonial turn'. While critical of Western epistemology's individualist, decontextualized and politically non-reflective approach to the effects of its own cultural and social locations, she argues that this does not mean we should abandon all attempts to justify



knowledge claims, ‘we need to take into account the identity and situatedness of knowers while still maintaining epistemology’s normative capacity’ (2011:70). While we should resist reducing knowledge to the identities of its knowers, especially in the Human and Social Sciences these do have epistemic salience and political consequences (Alcoff 2011). Instead she calls for a ‘political epistemology’ that questions how epistemic roles and authority are structured and institutionalised and what the ontological implications might be of our truth claims (2011:70).

My own position in this debate around what knowledge and which knowers should be valued and institutionalised is informed by the work of Roy Bhaskar, the founder of critical realism, (who ironically, takes a far more critical stance than the SR school of the Sociology of Education – especially towards the analytic tradition of Western philosophy on which they draw). Bhaskar (2016) argues that the historical development of Western thought has led to an ‘epistemic fallacy’ where knowing is substituted for being (only what we know is what exists). Instead he claims that epistemology is only one dimension of ontology – but because Western philosophy negates non-duality, it is unable to posit an underlying ontological unity (Bhaskar 2016). He suggests that this lack of ontological depth or ‘ontological mono-valence’ (2016: 87) in Western analytical philosophy in particular, has led to closed systems that exclude alterity and absence – which in turn may be related to a desire for control and fear of change. With regard to change, Bhaskar notes that all abstract theory inevitably leaves something out of its description of reality. This results in an incompleteness or inconsistency in its knowledge claims that can trigger a crisis in the field. Those in control of the theory will either adjust it, moving towards a better grasp of reality – morphogenesis; or they will resist change – leading to morphostasis (Archer 1996). Finally, Bhaskar points out that Western philosophy’s privileging of abstract universalism fails to capture the paradox of ‘concrete universality’ – the recognition that all universals manifest only in concrete embodied forms which in turn are always both a unique and singular instance of a universal (Bhaskar 2016:129).

## **What about Learning?**

Leibowitz (2017) and Zipin, Fataar & Brennan (2015) argue that those in ED working in the Bernsteinian SR school have failed to give sufficient attention

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to how people come to know; that learning is affective, emotional and experiential, as well as cognitive. In a similar vein, although the decolonial theorists do not address learning and teaching specifically, they promote the idea that institutions should promote human flourishing and well-being (Escobar 2010; Mignolo 2013). We have noted their critiques of modernity's 'dehumanizing' ways of thinking and being. One could speculate that they would advocate a weakening of the modern university's hard boundaries around the control of time and space, social relations and assessment. They would probably advocate a softening of the hierarchical framing of pedagogic interaction between lecturers and students to give more control to students over their own learning. Undoubtedly decolonial theorists would advocate this weakening of framing as a means of encouraging students to bring into the classroom their own cultural and linguistic resources for learning, leading to their affirmation, recognition and a more convivial and creative learning environment.

In contrast we have noted the negative effects on learning of a developmentalist and assimilationist pedagogic model<sup>8</sup> in the HWUs that focuses on teaching for modernity and is often blind to its own coloniality<sup>9</sup>. In this traditional model lecturers tend to take strong control over how teaching and learning happens, reinforcing hierarchical social relations in the classroom. In the HWUs, the privileging of knowing over being serves to retain considerable cultural and semiotic distance between the Eurocentric/ white subjectivities of the authors of texts and the academics who teach them and those of students from previously colonized groups.

An additional manifestation of 'coloniality' that constrains the successful academic performance of black students in South African universities is the strong framing of the language of instruction and the norm of high levels of English language proficiency. Students from poor schools are

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that in his work on pedagogic rights, Bernstein himself opposed a model of assimilation and remedial education for working class pupils.

<sup>9</sup> While it is true that many ED practitioners have challenged this model at an agentic level in their own classrooms, my argument is that we have failed to adequately challenge the curriculum structures and mainstream curricula of our institutions. Working with the two concepts 'epistemological access' to 'powerful knowledge' have further subdued this challenge.

forced to perform in an-other language without the requisite cultural capital to support it (Bangeni & Kapp 2017; Christie & McKinney 2017). This negation and devaluing of their being, languages and cultures robs students of motivation and agential resources to make their own meanings and engage actively in the learning process.

## **Thoughts on a Way Forward**

So, what does this mean for undergraduate teaching practice in South Africa? In this paper I have argued that in post-colonial contexts, especially post the student protests in historically white South African universities, it is urgent for some of us working in ED to re-think our use of the concepts ‘epistemological access’ to ‘powerful knowledge’ when used within curriculum structures that perpetuate a developmentalist paradigm. This is particularly important if we are to erase the legacy and culture of coloniality in our institutions and ensure that conditions for learning pertain for all students. In HWUs, it is particularly urgent that black students feel ‘at home’ in their universities, they must have their sense of agency restored and come to recognise themselves as sources of meaning-making. More widely, the recognition of indigenous cultures and languages for academic purposes and the employment of multi-lingual lecturers and tutors will be crucial going forward.

That said, new sets of knowers in the postcolony are not anti-modern, nor are they advocating a return to ‘pure’ indigenous knowledges and world views. The students I teach desire modernity but without the baggage and humiliation of coloniality; they want to appropriate modernity in their own ways for their own ends and contexts. Thus, I am not suggesting we should entirely abandon the work entailed in facilitating access to the what and how of knowledge practices. Rather we should broaden the concept of ‘epistemological access’ to include socio-cultural and ontological access and take into account the effects of our own positionality and institutional roles. Simply put this would entail subverting and challenging the structural, cultural and institutional legacies of colonialism and undoing the ways that coloniality positions us and shapes our subjectivities. We should stress the importance of making the curriculum accessible to all – not only in our own ED classrooms, but across the mainstream curriculum. This implies working with lecturers to ensure that valued knowledge and skills are recontextualized in ways that resonate with the lifeworlds, desires, concerns and projects of all students. As

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lecturers and ED practitioners we should be capable of recontextualized in ways that resonate with the lifeworlds, desires, concerns and projects of all students. If the curriculum fails to offer ontological affirmation and respect to students from previously colonised groups, their learning potential will be blocked by affective and motivational factors and they will fail to make their own meaning and internalise the knowledge, regardless of its 'power'.

What does this mean for the ED project? The project will have to be reconceptualised and restructured outside of a developmentalist paradigm. This means abandoning the two-track curriculum structure for undergraduate degrees. It is no longer tenable to place students into separate 3 and 4-year degree programmes with the latter looking remedial for students of a particular racial profile<sup>10</sup>. As long noted in ED circles, the mainstream undergraduate curriculum and the culture of the HWUs will have to change (be decolonised) to accommodate the students – and not the other way round. Student support – whether academic, psycho-social or curriculum advice – should be fully integrated into regular undergraduate curricula and available for all students as and when they chose to use it.

What does this mean for curriculum knowledge? If the concept 'powerful knowledge' is used to maintain an untouchable universal status for disciplinary knowledge that is blind to its social relations, then this normative commitment that is blind to its own coloniality should be abandoned. However, while the decolonial critique on South African campuses has highlighted ontological and experiential issues (for example Curriculum Change Framework, 2018) it is in danger of reducing knowledge to power relations (only)<sup>11</sup>. As argued above, the position advocated here is to agree that social identity is salient to epistemic judgement, but at the same time to reject social identity on its own as sufficient grounds for making a knowledge claim. Going forward, if it were possible to extract some of the analytic tools from the SR school's normative and ontological framing, these might still be useful for purposes of curriculum analysis and design. For example, Fataar (2018) has

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<sup>10</sup> This means that the current criteria for earning Foundation Grant subsidy from the DHET awarded only for students on programmes and courses that provide 'additional teaching input' (DHET, 2012) should be challenged.

<sup>11</sup> This may explain why decolonial critiques tend to work at high levels of abstraction, without providing clear guidelines for knowledge selection and curriculum design.

argued recently that the SR school's tools for analysing and differentiating knowledge structures may be useful to the decolonial movement in providing a principled approach to the selection of curriculum knowledge. Following Muller (2009) and Shay (2015), he suggests that the analytic distinction between conceptual and contextual coherence may be useful for this purpose. Similarly, I would venture that Maton's distinction between epistemic and social relations to knowledge could help identify which types of knowledge are most amenable to being decolonised.

That said, the answers to questions about legitimating curriculum knowledge are seldom determined on the basis of educational theory and principle alone. Instead they will emerge through actual curriculum debates and contestations. As Bernstein noted in another context,

Whoever appropriates the (pedagogic) device, has the power to regulate consciousness. Whoever appropriates the device, appropriates a crucial site for symbolic control. The device itself creates an arena of struggle for those who are to appropriate it' (Bernstein 2000:38).

Curriculum struggles are usually resolved through power struggles and seldom on the basis of sound curriculum theory.

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