Why are Black students fed up with whiteness?

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During the colonial and apartheid years, education in South Africa was used to subjugate the Black majority and propagate Eurocentrism and white supremacy. More than two decades after the end of apartheid, education at South African universities remains largely Eurocentric. While the universities have been deracialised and opened up to all who qualify for and can afford university education, the historically white universities remain institutionally white spaces for Black students, staff and academics.

Suransky and van der Merwe (2016: 578) write that the universities have failed to 'address their own particular apartheid legacy and become public universities for all citizens in a democratic society.' This is reflected through financial and language exclusion, unchanged institutional cultures, racist incidents, lack of transformation in the academia and Eurocentric curriculum.

In 2015, Black students began resisting epistemic violence and racism which obliterate the linkages they may have with the prescribed texts and propagated narratives on one side, and their lived experiences, history, needs, dreams and aspirations on the other side (Heleta, 2016: 4). The epistemic violence stems from the fact that the 'colonial model of academic organisation of the university, based on Western disciplinary knowledge, was entrenched during [colonialism and] apartheid and has not been redressed in post-apartheid [era] in any serious way' (Le Grange, 2016: 5).

The universities remain spaces where Black students are 'trained to assimilate' to heteronormative whiteness in order to fit in and function in post-apartheid South Africa. Universities are 'involved in the subjectification and disciplining of Black bodies according to colonial ideals' and assimilating them into the 'mainstream' social order that in many ways resembles the pre-1994 socio-economic order and hegemony (Fikeni, 2016).

When we talk about whiteness, we are referring to the 'system of domination and structure of privilege' (Dei, 2006: 12) that has driven the colonial and apartheid racist oppression for

centuries. Whiteness – 'a belief in white hegemony in South Africa' (Sehoole, 2006: 5) – has dominated the South African academia in the past and has continued after 1994.

The resistance to coloniality and whiteness at universities came from Black 'born frees,' a generation of young people who were told they were unburdened by the past and had options, choices and freedom their predecessors never had. But, as TO Molefe (2016: 32) points out, 'instead of freedom [and choices], the students had variations of the same story: No matter how hard or far they ran, they found themselves living in the long shadow of apartheid history.'

There was a hope, if not an expectation among many that the universities – and particularly the historically white universities – would after 1994 honestly and critically reflect on their past that saw them being tools or enablers of apartheid and the white supremacist project. However, this never happened and the universities were allowed to continue with 'business as usual,' especially when it comes to the Eurocentric curriculum and whiteness.

Universities are a microcosm of the society. They exist in a society that has not transformed and decolonised, where patriarchy, sexism and rape culture are the norm and victims are chastised and stigmatised more than the acts and the perpetrators. They are a microcosm of a society where the LGBTQIA+ community and people living with disabilities are excluded and othered and where structural socio-economic inequalities are rooted in the racist colonial and apartheid past and there is a lack of political will to bring about fundamental change.

Fed up with the failed promises from the current political dispensation and alienated by the university curriculum that does not speak to or reflects on their experiences, realities and needs of their communities (Letsekha, 2013: 8), Black students have risen up to demand real change at their institutions and in the society.

But why did this happen all around the country in 2015? Why not in 1998 or 2003?

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954) offers an explanation of why young Black South Africans began resisting the oppressive status quo and calling for fundamental change at country's universities in 2015.

For many years after 1994, Black students were supposed to be grateful for being able to study at historically white universities. In many places, they even became the majority of the student body. After access became normal for those who qualified and could afford university education, other issues and struggles moved up the list of priorities. These included white institutional cultures, racism, coloniality, dehumanisation, symbols of oppression, Eurocentric curriculum and white-dominated academia.

Young Black people who have access to university education are not satisfied with the access and the basics only, which can be placed at the bottom of Maslow's pyramid. They want more than a chance to study; they want to study the knowledge that is 'relevant to the material, historical and social realities of the communities [and the continent] in which universities operate' (Letsekha, 2013: 14). They also want to see fundamental change, dismantling of white domination and decolonisation at universities. And this is what they began to campaign for in 2015.

This can be explained through Maslow's top two needs – esteem and self-actualisation. When it comes to esteem, students want to achieve success in education and future life and be respected by others. For this, they need quality and relevant education. Regarding self-actualisation, students are aiming to achieve their full potential in education and life. Self-actualisation is also called a 'growth need.' Here, development of person's capacities is an ongoing process where 'potentialities of the self are made actual, are actualized in a continuing process of unfolding' (Heylighen, 1992).

However, Black South Africans cannot achieve this at universities which remain rooted in colonial and apartheid racism and ways of thinking and where 'European and white values are [still] perceived as the standards' (Ramoupi 2011: 5) for 'higher forms of thinking' (Department of Education, 2008: 91).

In many instances, the drive for self-actualisation springs 'from the frustration of a certain need rather than from its gratification' (Maslow, 1954, in Heylighen, 1992). The lack of fundamental change in the 'Rainbow Nation' and at its universities has greatly frustrated many Black students, driving them to organise a national movement that questioned the quality of education and called for dismantling of coloniality and whiteness.

Greene & Burke (2007: 120) write that social justice, transformation, human rights and development beyond self are concepts that become prominent when people reach the self-actualisation stage in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. As Said (2002: 30-31) points out, 'the existence of individuals or groups seeking social justice and economic equality, and who understand that freedom must include the right to a whole range of choices affording cultural, political, intellectual and economic development, ipso facto will lead one to a desire for articulation as opposed to silence.'

The student movement has since 2015 shaken the South African higher education system to its core. Student activism has ended the blatant exploitation of the poor through insourcing of workers at universities. At the end of 2017, the government committed to the free education for the poor. Decolonisation of knowledge has become the buzzword at universities.

However, in this process the movement has also fragmented. The relative unity of the student movement seen in 2015 collapsed in 2016, when politics infiltrated the space and caused mistrust, infighting, frustration and competition within the movement itself. On many campuses, students who called for anything perceived as moderate were often disrupted and sidelined, with hardline and all-or-nothing views becoming the norm.

The movement also saw a struggle over intersectionality and gender and marginalisation of LGBTIQA+ individuals and groups. Those who campaigned to end patriarchy and male domination in the society, at universities and in the student movement itself were accused of undermining the struggle by sections of the movement that saw intersectionality as a distraction from the issues related to race and class.

Despite all the challenges and the resistance by those who want to maintain the status quo, decolonisation of knowledge remains an existential project that the current and future generations of students and progressive academics must fight for. Activism may have subdued but many burning issues remain and we are still to see fundamental change. Going forward, whiteness and coloniality in higher education must be disrupted and challenged intellectually, through exposing and confronting of the racist, discriminatory and irrelevant curriculum. Decolonised curriculum that emerges in the process of fundamental transformation must be free from Western epistemological domination, Eurocentrism, epistemic violence and world

views that were designed to degrade, exploit and subjugate the people in Africa and other parts of the formerly colonized world.

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