

Beyond counting the numbers: Shifting higher education transformation into curriculum spaces

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Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa, the path of higher education transformation has been guided by the 'White Paper 3: A Programme for Higher Education Transformation'. This path has largely been conceptualised within a framework of equity through redress and social justice that sought to change the face of higher education through demographic changes. Hence higher education transformation largely took on a number-counting process. The curriculum changes that have taken place thus far have largely been of an instrumental and responsive modality. In this paper I argue that deep curriculum transformation in higher education will be possible if we shift our gaze from predominantly a number-counting exercise to curriculum intellectualism. The next wave of higher education curriculum transformation would be a fundamental rethink based on emerging curriculum theories.

Introduction

A recent attempt to influence higher education curriculum was made through a proposal for the introduction of a flexible curriculum for the undergraduate programmes offered across higher education institutions (CHE 2013a). This proposal was based on a numerical assessment of cost associated with the low throughput and high attrition for universities as noted through the many reports (e.g. Vital Stats 2011 by CHE 2013b; Diagnostic overview presented by the National Planning Commission 2011) on student throughput and dropout in higher education. The argument is based on the recognition that school education has not provided the competence in learners to transit into higher education and that, in order to address this transition gap, either school education needs to improve on its quality or higher education should do something to address the shortcomings of school education. The proposal for the flexible curriculum sought to address the shortcomings of school education through changes to the higher education undergraduate curriculum. Currently, most higher education institutions in South Africa offer some form of foundation programme to widen access and to provide additional support to students that do not meet admission or selection requirements into programmes. The proposal recognises that the cost associated with low throughput and high dropout is less than that associated with changing a 3- or 4-year programme into a 4- or 5-year programme, respectively, with options to complete a year earlier for students who do not need such academic support. This early exit brings the flexibility dimension to this proposal. Why are we, as South African intellectuals and policymakers, continuing in this instrumental and numerical mode of thinking and response? Issues of under-preparedness, low throughput and high dropout from higher education are global phenomena with, for example, the US context engaging with this problem for nearly a century (Tinto 2012) with no clear resolution to these issues.

Higher education transformation in South Africa has thus far been located within the domain of counting numbers. The transformation agenda for higher education set several goals. Most were numerical changes to patterns of higher education offerings that had their roots in apartheid ideology and that the South African democratic government sought to radically change. These numerical changes related to widening access, changes in programme type enrolment patterns, institutional re-landscaping to address issues of resources, quality and historical legacies (elaborated in the forthcoming section) and programme differentiation. Although these transformational agendas are revealing themselves in the demographic changes noticeable in higher education statistics (CHE 2013b), the problems of throughput, dropout and academic support still remain and have the potential to destabilise the transformational achievements noted (e.g. changes in enrolment patterns across qualification types and changes in demographics of student populations) (Ramrathan & Pillay 2015). Several interventions were made attempting to stem this critical problem of low efficiencies recorded in higher education outputs. These interventions included identification, monitoring, supporting and tracking of students identified as at risk of failing;

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introduction of access and foundation programmes; and several secondary support programmes like financial support, food security and student counselling. These interventions have the potential to address the inefficiencies noted, but their effects have not yet been realised.

Fundamental changes to higher education curricula have not happened across South African higher education institutions for nearly a century; they bear a close resemblance to colonial education (CHE 2013a). Thus far changes to higher education curricula have been cosmetic and of an instrumental nature, largely in response to policy drivers (e.g. national frameworks for qualifications and curriculum frameworks developed by professional bodies) and social and health issues (introduction of modules for language competence, HIV and other life-threatening diseases). The field of curriculum studies has, in the last two decades, expanded significantly beyond instrumental discipline-based curriculum development (adding and removing of modules as and when needed) to include mode 2 transdisciplinary knowledge systems (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons 2003), autobiographical approaches or currere (Pinar 2010), complicated conversations (Pinar 2010) and epistemological and ontological innovations located in indigenous knowledge systems. The current trajectory on curriculum reforms in higher education is lacking in its approach to innovative ways of curriculum intellectualism, largely because of the fixation on redress transformation agendas based on numerical changes.

Therefore, in this paper I argue that despite the changes made to higher education curriculum in South Africa since apartheid, fundamental curriculum transformation has not yet taken place within higher education and that an appropriate opportunity is now available to embrace new intellectualism related to higher education curriculum transformation. The argument is based on an analysis of the transformation that has taken place in higher education thus far. A synopsis of higher education transformation in South Africa since democracy is presented as a context to understand the priorities that have driven the transformational agenda thus far. The paper extends to include episodes of curriculum transformation that have resulted in instrumental changes to programme offerings, including that of my personal experience as a teacher education coordinator, in reconceptualising programmes when demanded to through policy changes. The paper concludes with a discussion on how curriculum transformation might unfold in the next leg of higher education transformation in South Africa.

Higher education transformation in South Africa

The history and consequences of apartheid within South Africa have been well documented in the literature (e.g. Brown 2006; Cloete 2006). In summary, for the purpose of this paper, these include a race-based categorisation that was strategically used to discriminate and sustain white privileges by dominating blacks (African students are considered a

distinct group from the generic 'black' nomenclature, which comprises African, Indian and coloured – the distinctive racial groups that were considered disadvantaged during the apartheid era). This domination led to retrogressive life experiences for those disenfranchised by apartheid policies and structures. Education of black people, for example, was neglected in comparison to white education (Brown 2006). During apartheid, the funding for black education was extremely low and this was paralleled by a reduced participation especially for the majority of the African population, who were clearly only being schooled for low-skilled jobs (Brown 2006). Chetty and Vigar-Ellis (2012:909) commented that 'education in South Africa is an area where the effects of apartheid have been felt severely'.

Moja and Cloete (1996) noted early in our democratic society that, through a review of South African universities, the overall higher education system at that time perpetuated inequalities and that reforms to redress inequalities were needed to ensure greater relevance, accountability and democracy. The National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), chaired by Prof. J. Reddy, was proposed and adopted with the purpose of making appropriate policy recommendations for changes to the higher education system within South Africa (Moja & Cloete 1996). Although it was assumed that the main driver of change would be government policy, changes in higher education institutions following a variety of routes resulted in certain apartheid differences being accentuated and new differences started emerging in the higher education institutional landscape. For example, the merger process of higher education institutions that was initiated in 2002 left some historically privileged institutions unchanged and accentuated exclusions through, for example, language policies that were seen to be exclusionary. Some institutions experienced research marginalisation in terms of funding, as privileging research was seen as an income-generation process. Institutions that had a superficial focus on research, therefore, were financially disadvantaged as they were not able to generate significant funding through research outputs and, therefore, could not attract research-active high quality staff to drive the research agenda of the institution.

In its education priorities, the NCHE asserted the principle of equity with redress, development to spark productivity and democratisation through participation and representation. The numerous broad NCHE aims are greater constituency participation for mass education, increasing various types of linkages or partnerships, participatory modes at institutions and responsiveness to more open knowledge systems (Department of Education 1996). The NCHE thus asserted systematic coordination (even of qualifications), which included unity, diversity, flexible entry, more participation with equal opportunities and the building of open-ended research capacity for a sustainable innovative system and to create international standards with sensitivity directed towards student needs (Department of Education 1996).

The National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education 2001), which was approved by Cabinet in

February 2001, identified five key policy goals and strategic objectives necessary for achieving the overall goal for the transformation of the higher education system as follows:

- to increase access and to produce graduates with the skills and competencies necessary to meet the human resource needs of the country
- to promote equity of access and outcomes and to redress past inequalities through ensuring that student and staff profiles reflect the demographic composition of South African society
- to ensure diversity in the institutional landscape of the higher education system through mission and programme differentiation to meet national and regional skills and knowledge needs
- to build high-level research capacity, including sustaining current research strength, and to promote research linked to national development needs
- to restructure and consolidate the institutional landscape of the higher education system to transcend the fragmentation, inequalities and inefficiencies of the apartheid past and to enable the establishment of South African institutions consistent with the vision and values of a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society.

A current review of these transformation goals suggests that some of these goals have been met, while others are ongoing aspirations (Letseka & Malie 2008; Lewin & Mawoyo 2014; Ramrathan 2013).

Each of these transformational goals was largely number based and required shifts in numerical accountability as evidence of achieving the transformational goal. For the purpose of this paper, I engage with student access to higher education as a transformation goal to show the over-reliance on number changes rather than fundamental changes to the nature, form and experience of higher education curricula in South Africa.

The current status of access and participation in higher education in South Africa

The increase in demand for higher education seems to be a worldwide phenomenon (Schofer & Meyer 2005), with higher education capacity not increasing sufficiently to accommodate this increased demand. In the South African context, approximately 17% of those who complete their grade 12 (matriculation) school education access higher education across the 26 public funded institutions, in spite of the targeted enrolment plans of 20% to be realised in 2001 as indicated in the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education 2001; Lewin & Mawoyo 2014). The latest audited statistics indicate that in 2011, approximately 938 000 students were enrolled in higher education across the public universities, growing from 495 000 in 1994. The enrolment of African students rose from 43% of total enrolment in 1994 to 67% in 2010. Using the generic nomenclature *black*, enrolment increased from 55% in 1994 to

81% in 2011 (Lewin & Mawoyo 2014), suggesting that participation of the previously denied population groups has increased to reflect the demographics of our country. A more nuanced picture appears when one considers participation rates in terms of the national population demographics. While enrolment figures tell us the number of students per race category enrolled in higher education, the participation rate is a more complex phenomenon where the enrolment of a particular race group is measured in terms of its proportional population demographics. For example, while 2% of the population of South Africa are Indians, the 6% enrolment of Indians in higher education constitutes a 47% participation rate amongst the Indian population group. This nuanced calculation means that, proportional to their population size, Indian students have a higher participation rate than African or coloured students. The current situation suggests that the Indian and white population participation rates are much higher than those of the African and coloured population groups, implying that participation in higher education for the African and coloured population groups is still marginal and unrepresentative of their population size. While the increase in enrolment since the dawn of democracy seems encouraging, issues of access are still very much a central discourse, especially within the context of quality education, student success and graduation rates.

While, for example, the current demographics of higher education reflect the demographic population of South Africa, far-reaching communities (usually in deep rural areas) continue to be marginalised. The forms of marginalisation include lack of adequate marketing of higher education in deep rural communities, thereby limiting potential access of these marginalised communities to higher education study programmes.

Overall, there seems to be an overt sense that, as a national agenda, the transformation of higher education in relation to student access and participation has achieved its intended goals. There is, however, growing concerns that this agenda is being threatened (Letseka & Malie 2008; Ramrathan 2013) with the realisation that student graduation rates, quality of graduates and equity of access will severely compromise the gains made by the transformation charter. The throughput rates, graduation rates and dropout rates across public higher education institutions are a cause for concern with the Human Science Research Council, recording as many as 40% of students dropping out of university in their first year of study (University World News 2008) and graduation rates being in the region of only 15% (Department of Higher Education 2013). Concern about the low efficiency of higher education was noted by the Department of Education (1997), which initiated a series of intervention programmes that included additional preparation of school learners for higher education through programmes such as the Upward Bound Programme (Ramrathan, Manik & Pillay 2007); access programmes for students who did not meet admission requirements into particular programmes; and foundation programmes to provide epistemological access to university

studies. The proposal by the Council for Higher Education (2013a) on the introduction of a flexible curriculum was the latest higher education curriculum intervention to address issues of low throughput and high dropout levels across institutions. However, this proposal was not accepted based on review comments received on the proposal. The curriculum interventions to support transforming the higher education system in terms of access were of an instrumental nature of potential additive value without asking fundamental questions like the following: what curriculum would be most appropriate for the kinds of students that are aspiring to higher education studies; where would these qualifications lead the graduate to; and what learning experiences should students be exposed to and why?

Policy changes that required curriculum transformation in higher education programmes

Noting that changes to higher education since apartheid were to be driven by appropriate policy recommendations, the first wave of curriculum transformation that I experienced and worked through in higher education offerings was the modularising of courses into coherent units of learning. Institutions were required to modularise their courses into term, semester or year-long modules. Credit values were allocated to each module. There was no clear guidance on how credit values should be allocated. Hence, institutions developed modules by breaking up existing courses into smaller units of learning and allocated credit points based on institutional decisions. In my institution, a term module was allocated three credit points, a semester module was allocated six credit points and a year module was allocated 12 credit points. The purposes of modularising programmes were to allow for the following:

- recognition of units of learning as well as full qualifications
- transferability of units of learning across programmes
- portability of units of learning across institutions through recognition of prior learning.

A further development to the modularisation process was the standardisation of module credits within the National Qualification Framework (NQF). In this development, one credit point was deemed equivalent to 10 notional hours of study, meaning that a module that is allocated 15 credit points would require an average student to spend approximately 150 notional hours of module engagement, which includes attending lectures, tutorials and seminars; self-study; assessments; and additional reading. The modular system and its associated credit values formed the basis of qualification construction, recognition of learning and qualification certification.

The second wave of curriculum transformation was initiated by the introduction of regulatory frameworks that sought to (1) register qualifications on the NQF as regulated by the South African Qualifications Authority, (2) accredit qualifications for quality offerings as regulated by the Council

for Higher Education and (3) obtain approval of programme qualification mix for subsidy purposes. This wave of curriculum transformation was located within an outcomes-based ideology with credit points and level descriptors forming the structure of a programme within the NQF. Programmes could be registered on the NQF as either whole qualifications with exit level outcomes, programme total credit points and assessment criteria or by registering units of learning with rules of combination, with each unit of learning contributing to the attainment of graduate attributes for the programme. For the teacher education programmes a parallel regulatory framework, Norms and Standards for Educators (NSE), was developed and gazetted in 2000 (Department of Education 2000). Institutions that offered teacher education programmes were required to develop teacher education qualifications in line with the NSE. The identified roles of a teacher informed the design of teacher education programmes. The NSE was arguably a technical curriculum guided by units of learning and associated credit points that accounted for how each of the seven roles of an educator would be developed.

The third wave of curriculum transformation is currently unfolding and was initiated by a review of the NQF. The new NQF now has 10 levels, with the doctoral qualification occupying the uppermost level of the NQF. Pathways within the NQF were developed to allow for transitions between qualification types and programme streams, meaning that students can start their academic study within one study field but change streams to another qualification in a different field of study. Academic and professional qualifications were pegged at different levels, while programme study periods were changed. For undergraduate and honours programmes the study periods remained 30 weeks per academic year and constituted a minimum of 120 credit points per annum, whereas research degrees (master's and doctoral degrees) were extended over 45 weeks per academic year and constituted a minimum of 180 credit points per annum. Further developments in curriculum changes were in relation to generic and professional bachelor's degrees, with professional bachelor's degrees being pegged at level 8 of the NQF and generic bachelor's degree at level 7. Post-graduate qualifications from honours level upwards were required to include research training with varying scopes of research capacity development.

From the above waves of curriculum reforms within higher education, it is clear that these reforms were instrumental in nature and still located within a counting rationality. Credit points, level descriptors and rules of combination formed the basis of curriculum reforms. There were, however, attempts at deep curriculum transformation associated with epistemology and ontology. The conception of deep curriculum transformation was developed from a notion of deep teacher learning (Samuel 2009). Samuel (2009) uses the metaphor of an iceberg to illustrate deep teacher professional learning, where that which is above the water is representative of public propositional knowledge in the form of theories,

principles and policies. That which is below the surface is more complex and is formed from a wealth of craft knowledge in contexts, relationships and ways of being.

The first of these attempts was located in the debates and curriculum changes relating to mode 1 knowledge (disciplinary-based knowledge systems) and mode 2 knowledge (transdisciplinary knowledge systems) ontologies (Nowotny *et al.* 2003), which initiated a transdisciplinary approach to knowledge construction. There is evidence of success in this line of curriculum transformation with the introduction and proliferation of new academic disciplines based on transdisciplinary research agendas. A second attempt at deep curriculum transformation is located in the drive to explore and privilege indigenous epistemologies and indigenous knowledge systems. These two attempts at deep curriculum transformation suggest a shift from a numerical counting-based transformation agenda to an agenda that has the potential to fundamentally transform higher education curriculum.

Why has curriculum transformation across South African higher education taken this path?

Noting that, under apartheid governance, education was where the majority of apartheid's effects were felt severely (Chetty & Vigar-Ellis 2012), the promotion of equity, redress and social justice within a democratic South Africa had to take on a policy-driven process. The policy-driven process has an inherent weakness: policies are by nature political and informed by political agendas. This weakness presents a sense of tentativeness, meaning that policies could change depending upon reviews for fitness for purpose, as was the case across the school curriculum policies that were implemented since democracy. The school curriculum changed several times since the introduction of outcomes-based education through Curriculum 2005 into the school education system. Changes to the custodians of policies (for example, member of the Executive Councils of provincial governments) based on low accountability may result in new custodians attempting to make their footprint in educational reforms and often making drastic changes from their predecessors.

As Apple (1993) suggests:

[E]ducation is deeply implicated in the politics of culture. The curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of a nation. It is always part of a selective tradition, someone's selection, some group's vision of legitimate knowledge. It is produced out of the cultural, political, and economic conflicts, tensions, and compromises that organize and disorganize a people. (p. 1)

Similarly, Tierney (1989:4) believes that if knowledge is socially constructed, then the methodology used to study the curriculum needs to unearth the multitude of organisational voices in order to understand how knowledge has been constructed, who constructed it and what alternative

constructions are possible. In a similar vein, Chisholm (2003) advocates that:

[I]n national political processes such as curriculum making, voice is refracted through both the positioning of the voice and authority of who speaks. The authority of voice is derived from the positionality of the speaking voice. In addressing the authority and positionality of voice, the question of power is also critical: who exercises power, how and through which voice. (p. 2)

Within the South African politics since apartheid, political transformation has taken centre fold in developing the nation and the ruling party has become the dominant voice of change in every facet of life, including that of higher education. While the area of educational transformation is broad, a specific focus is placed in this paper on curriculum transformation in higher education, alongside that on the higher education transformational goals set for the South African higher education system.

It is within this politically driven transformational context that I cast a critical lens on my experience of reconceptualising the Bachelor of Education curriculum that is expected to be in place by 2017 across higher education institutions within South Africa. Through this critical lens I demonstrate the power dynamics inherent in curriculum reforms within higher education. Most institutions are currently reconceptualising their Bachelor of Education curriculum as part of the compliance requirement necessitated by the introduction and gazetting of two new higher education frameworks that have direct influence in the construction of this curriculum. The first of the frameworks is the Higher Education Qualification Framework (Department of Education 2007a), an outcome of the review and revision of the NQF. The second framework is the National Framework for Teacher Education (Department of Education 2007b), which arose out of a review of teacher education in South Africa by a ministerial committee appointed by the then-Minister of Education. The second framework is perhaps more pertinent to this paper, as it sets the framework for regulating all qualifications in teacher education within South Africa. This regulatory framework was gazetted in 2015 as the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualification (Department of Higher Education 2015). It is through this regulatory framework that I demonstrate a layered rationality conception in curriculum construction as well as the hierarchies within each layer that have thus far influenced curriculum decisions. The importance of illuminating these layers of hierarchies and power dynamics lies in the identification and understanding of how these hierarchies and power dynamics operate and influence curriculum design. Drawing on Apple's (1993) notion that curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, these layers of influence attest to how power is used to influence curriculum decisions.

I call this (Figure 1) the 'layered rationality of curriculum construction', where at each level of curriculum engagement there is a different lens of rationality that guides its decision-making, and through this process some things are kept in

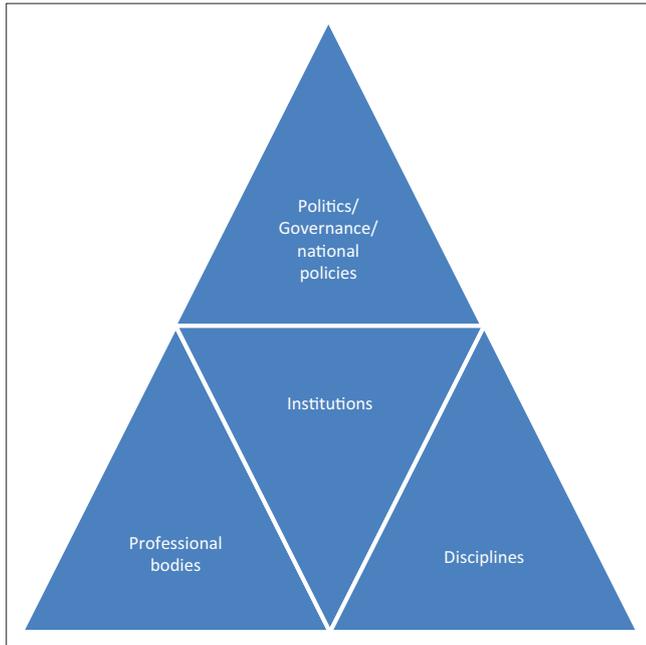


FIGURE 1: A diagrammatic depiction of a three-layered rationality of influence in curriculum decision-making.

and some are discarded or relegated to the periphery. There can be several layers of rationality that influence curriculum decisions (Figure 1 displays only three layers, an overarching layer of political governance, a subordinate layer constituted by the institution offering the curriculum and a third layer that is influenced by multiple organs or individuals competing for dominance). In addition, at each of these levels of engagement, several competing structures, processes and bodies do exist and demand curriculum spaces in the curriculum design and that the influence of these structures, processes and bodies be dependent upon the power base they command.

Making more explicit the above conceptualisation of layered rationality, I draw on my experience in designing and gaining approval for the Bachelor of Education qualification within and outside of the institution.

Starting at the lowest rung of a rationality hierarchy, a *wants rationality* based on desirability allows individuals, groups (e.g. disciplines) and professional bodies to place on the table a dream list of desirable things that they would like to see within a curriculum. This means that this layer of demand is the greatest but that there is a realisation that not all their 'wants' can be accommodated within the final curriculum because of the curriculum space available for a programme design. At this layer, a lot of trade-offs are expected and usually the stronger bodies would have a greater say in what gets in and what is kept out. In this situation, the political strength of the competing forces determines what stays in and what gets sidelined in curriculum choices. In constructing the Bachelor of Education qualification at my institution, the individual academic staff and discipline interests formed the competing forces within the subordinate level. Staff presented their list of wants in

the reconceptualised curriculum, which included their personal specialisation focus or aspects from their academic experience that could be satisfied through curriculum interventions (e.g. more emphasis on discipline management). Disciplines wanted more subject content modules to be included in the programme. The influence of the teaching profession through the South African Council for Educators was minimal and was considered as part of the policy requirements for teacher development. While each of these competing agents in curriculum design has positions of power, the process of approval within the university structures renders staff and discipline wants within a curriculum design powerless. This is because the final say of what gets included in a curriculum ultimately belongs to the university's decision-making structures. Hence, what gets into the curriculum design is dictated by the level of leverage the agents have. The institution thus forms the next layer of decision-making within the curriculum design process. The institution places its priorities and demands on curriculum construction for programmes offered. For example, an institution wanted to promote its language policy and foundational programmes to increase access and participation. The institution also wanted to remove progression obstacles like prerequisites and co-requisites within the programme design. Hence, these curriculum elements had to be incorporated in the design of undergraduate programmes if these programmes were to be approved by the approval structures. In this case, the institution had greater leverage than the discipline or the staff in determining what was included and what was sidelined in curriculum construction. This is because of the decision-making powers that reside in the university's structures. The staff of disciplines cannot offer a programme that is not approved by the university structures and therefore rendered less powerful in curriculum decision-making. There are, however, instances where the institutional power is subdued by other agents, like professional bodies (e.g. Health Professional Council of South Africa and Engineering Council of South Africa) who use registration for practice as their bargaining tool for domination.

At the institutional level of curriculum construction engagement, a *management rationality* would influence decision-making. At this level, issues of management would be the lens through which decisions would be made. Some of the management principles considered would be, amongst others, time management, distribution, coordination, work schedules, outputs and accountability. Through this lens, curriculum decisions are made that fit in with the management discourse and curriculum aspects are either retained, added in or left out. In the redesign of the Bachelor of Education, the management decisions were related to the capacity to offer a range of teaching specialisations. For example, in deciding on the Further Education and Training teaching specialisation to be offered, the inability to employ additional staff due to financial constraints restricted the specialisation choices to scarce skills subjects. Hence resource constraints informed the curriculum choices from a management perspective.

Finally, there is the *political rationality* layer, where controlling agents, based on their mandates and manifestos, would make decisions on what is kept and what is left out based on what political decisions govern their actions. The government, for example, would ask how this curriculum would meet its party mandates and manifestos. How are certain agendas of the ruling political party promoted through the curriculum? What kind of citizens does the political party envision and how does the curriculum contribute to this creation of citizenship? The power in the governance rationality is exercised through national policies and sanctioned through registration, accreditation and approval protocols. The Bachelor of Education needed to satisfy particular national imperatives like learner-centred education, inclusive education, integration of computer technology in teaching and learning and focused engagement with the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. Programmes that did not explicitly show how these competences were developed within the Bachelor of Education were not approved by the Department of Higher Education and, therefore, could not be offered by the institution.

Where to from here in higher education curriculum transformation?

Scanning the literature on curriculum within higher education and from my personal experiences and reflections on curriculum decision-making and construction, it seems clear that curriculum construction continues to be influenced at an institutional level by the deep critique related to its contested nature (Apple 2010; Pinar 2010), its complicated conversation (Pinar 2010) and politically charged observances, hierarchies and power dynamics (Apple 2012) (e.g. the case of the BEd curriculum design). These observances have been well documented in, for example, Michael Apple's writings on curriculum indicating that the power located within curriculum discourses is difficult to eradicate and that curriculum intellectuals need to consistently disrupt and record these power dynamics. It is perhaps now time to reflect more deeply on understanding the power dynamic within curriculum construction rather than to preoccupy ourselves with trying to neutralise these power dynamics. Apple's (2010) writings suggest that the relationship between power and curriculum construction be continually illuminated, disrupted and recorded in order to propel changes on a continual basis. This recording of hegemonic biases in curriculum accumulates to form the strong turbulence that is needed to propel change. It must also be noted that the disruption and recording of hegemonies in curriculum construction is tentative and evolving. When change happens, new forms of hegemony become apparent, as within the curriculum craze that is currently unfolding within South Africa, and therefore the continuous illumination, disruption and recording of curriculum hegemony must become a continuing norm.

For deep curriculum transformation to occur within the South African higher education system, a deliberate shift

away from a counting exercise is needed. The curriculum spaces for deep curriculum transformation lie beyond the public propositional perspective of accounting. Rather, through new insights into curriculum (e.g. a focus on situated and propositional ontologies, innovative and transformative ways of inquiry, embracing complexities and uncertainties and that which is biographically influenced), deep curriculum transformation within higher education is possible.

Noting that South African higher education was adopted almost a century ago, it has remained largely unchanged despite the major changes that have occurred socially, politically and economically. We should examine why, for example, a generic bachelor's degree requires two majors that may sometimes not necessarily cohere or be cognate. Deep curriculum intellectualism is needed to shift the gaze from instrumental curriculum reforms to higher education curriculum located within an ontological orientation rather than a responsive orientation.

Conclusion

In this article I attempted to locate higher education curriculum reforms within a transforming higher education system with a view to illuminating the fixation on a number-counting rationality that is currently driving post-apartheid reforms. Through my personal experience in reconceptualising the Bachelor of Education degree at my institution, I reflected on the power of various agents involved in the decision-making process, suggesting a layered rationale illuminating where centres of powers are located, each demanding spaces in the curriculum for their agendas. The layered rationale metaphor attempted to show the dominance of power dynamics in curriculum construction. Drawing on Apple's conception of hegemony and curriculum, I argued that by moving beyond the power dynamics inherent in curriculum decision-making, deep curriculum intellectualism is possible and should form the next wave of curriculum reforms in higher education within South Africa.

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Competing interests

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