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Establishing a Sociocultural Approach to Philosophy for Children in a Marginalised Educational Context



John Bhurekeni

John (PhD) is a postdoctoral fellow at the Environmental Learning Research Centre, Rhodes University, South Africa. John developed a decolonial approach to philosophy for children that expanded primary school children’s critical reflexive thinking skills and teachers’ capability for creatively engaging heritage-based curriculum. His research interest is in the fields of philosophy for children, global citizenship education, and education for sustainable development as they apply in primary school education contexts in Africa and the Global South.



Introduction

In retrospect, I never anticipated that the work I was doing with parents, teachers, education inspectors, and children would earn me the South African Education Research Association's best PhD award in 2023. The study on which I am reflecting was done as a PhD by publication, which entails the publication of papers along with their orientation and interpretation. Its main focus was on 'Exploring aspects of community of inquiry (COI) in Afrophilia learning processes for transformative education using an Afrophilic 'philosophy for children' approach'.

Growing up in a small village in Zimbabwe's Chirumanzu District in the 1980s, I attended school where I had to adhere to the restricting limits of a restrictive and narrowly framed curriculum inherited from the colonial government. My formal schooling experiences were far removed from my everyday experiences at home, including the life skills I and my childhood acquaintances learned while herding cattle with our uncle Matunha. Even though minor curriculum reforms were done during my schooling days,



The author during one of his back-to-school visits to town in the 1990s, just before the new school year began. It was typical for children in my village to travel to town at least once throughout the school year. Photo credit: John Bhurekeni

I had to continuously learn how to navigate my way in-between these two disconnections until after graduating from teachers' college with a teaching diploma.

For over 17 years, as a primary school teacher with a specialization in environmental science education and philosophy, I have worked to integrate philosophy for children and environmental science into my teaching practice in order to promote reflexive critical thinking. Through my research work, I have intentionally made use of stories, specifically traditional stories from Southern Africa or Zimbabwe, to enter in the philosophical perspective through our living heritage practices/ culture, and the results have shown that Afrophilia reflexive artefacts (as I called them) make learning relevant to the learners' life world. Teaching philosophy from a theoretical and abstract approach has never been part of our teaching because it produces a disjunction between our real-life social values and norms and those that are already embedded in theory.

One of the most typical questions I encounter at academic conferences, where I advance the visibility of my work, is how to define Afrophilia. What I would like to admit in this article, as I have on many other occasions, is that Afrophilia, as I understand it, is interdisciplinary, and as such, it has become so expansive and heterogeneous that it defies definition as a love for Africa. Thus, Afrophilia foundations in the study are regarded as "the discourses that are the medium of philosophical reflexion" (Rettova, 2004, p. 4) in each African society.



Children at one of the Sebakwe primary schools fetching drinking water from an open water source for their teachers. Photo Credit: John Bhurekeni

Those who were able to read some of the previous articles I wrote related to my doctoral research are aware that I presented such discourses to include African proverbs, poems, stories, music, and folktales, all of which are useful in the initiation of philosophical engagements with children in a community of inquiry approach.

Set in an intensely underprivileged educational context, that of resettlement schools in Sebakwe, Zimbabwe, my work with children was driven by a strong desire to see a more empowered learner with the know-hows, skills, and competencies that allow them to function and thrive in their society. Much of the photographic evidence documented in the study, as illustrated by the picture above, evolved the theme of abjection.

In Zimbabwe, the discourse of abjection by race in education was replaced in 1980 [at the attainment of political

independence] by a focus on equal access to educational opportunities [Bhurekeni, 2022]. Prior to 1980, Zimbabwe had two distinct educational systems, one for the imperial colonial masters and the other for the colonised black majority.

It is bizarre that forty-four years after independence, teachers and learners are subjected to conditions that make them uncomfortable, resulting in social abjection and a high disinterest in formal school education. However, such experiences of social abjection served as an essential foundation for mapping my study's decolonial turn and reinforcing the desire to succeed with the learners, teachers, and parents whom I worked with. To accomplish this, I utilised an approach to teaching and learning known as philosophy for children, which has the potential to help learners to develop an improved understanding of life's big questions and co-construct meaning from the content they learn [Lipman, 2003].



In my study, I explained that there are already two well-established generations of Philosophy for Children (P4C), and I reaffirmed that my research constitutes one of those aimed at describing the emergence of the third generation. This is because, during the initial stages of the Philosophy for Children programme, the Institute of the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) produced only one curriculum (Lipman, 2003). A common feature across the three generations established to date is that philosophy cannot be force-fed to people; they must be 'delighted' in doing it, and as a result, the curriculum has been designed to present philosophy in a dialogical manner, in which teaching and learning occur in tandem (Goering, Shudak, & Wartenberg, 2013). The third generation Philosophy for Children curriculum with which I am working, in the idea of decolonial futures as it emphasizes development of diversity in reasoning in heritage-based contexts for purposes of making sure that children develop a strong sense of identity and competences in contexts that are relevant to their life worlds.



Kudu, a common wildlife animal in the Sebakwe area, but now under threat as most people hunt it for meat. Photo credit: Getty Images.

The search for an education system that is relevant to the learner's life world via the implementation of a P4C educational intervention demonstrates how P4C influences 'possibilities of more meaningful times ahead'. Finding meaningful times is one of the obstacles of postcolonial societies, because at the moment, "we live in the present historical conjuncture" (Reynolds, 2009, p. 20), that is politicized, and our learning institutions are ideological market places.

A look at the Zimbabwean Curriculum

A critical observation that I made during my study was that the Zimbabwean schools' curriculum, like other southern African countries, is influenced by historical fragmentations of a colonial past that only allowed learners to practice their own culture within the framework of the imperial colonial structure. This unconscious misalignment of the Zimbabwean education praxis including its philosophical underpinnings, I argued, demonstrates how vestiges of colonial rule are still shaping the education sector leaving it to focus mainly on abstracted concepts with continued marginalization of local cultures, discourses, and knowledge (Bhurkeni, 2020). Paradoxically, postcolonial reforms continue to miss the point, as they are anchored not only on continuities of coloniality but also on superficiality and doxa, which translates into exclusion of epistemic depth.



The Zimbabwean education curriculum therefore is still in need of counterhegemonic options that will help address the persistent curriculum issues, and more importantly, create time and space for engaging and listening to children's voices. Child(ren) and children's voices are complex concepts that invite education thinkers and educators to focus on developing an educational curriculum that goes beyond children's verbal perspectives to include their non-verbal communications, visual art, music, poetry, drawings, and imaginations. Work on searching for counterhegemonic options is well explained in my thesis chapter on decoloniality and postcolonial theory and also Bhurekeni (2020).

My approach to decoloniality in children's learning is motivated by the history of the word school, which in ancient Greek was known as *scholē* and meant leisure. Experience doing philosophy with children demonstrates that the vague boundaries between learning and leisure play into the hands of learning- an evolving and sophisticated activity that is prevalent in today's society, particularly in formal schooling. One of the parent-participants taught me a Shona proverb that says, 'Chikomo shata divi, rimwe ritambire pwere', which means that a rocky or steep slope may be unsuitable for play, emphasising the need for improving the curriculum in order to better accommodate the learning needs of children.

In my years as a professional primary school teacher, I have found that free-play

allows children to spend time investigating and thinking about things, which explains the link between leisure and learning, and eventually to a place of learning [school]. And this is what I desired for the children in the resettlement areas where I worked, so that instead of witnessing a culture of high learner disinterest in learning, they would develop an intense interest and desire to continue their education.

The Resettlement Schools in Zimbabwe

Teaching in Zimbabwean resettlement schools entails encountering unique challenges and experiences. These schools, including the Sebakwe resettlement ones, were established at a point when the government was implementing a land reform program with minimal to no social facilities, including schools, clinics, access to clean drinking water, and a good road network.

In 2012, a Zimbabwean parliamentary committee acknowledged that infrastructure in resettlement schools was



A picture of children attending lessons at one of schools in the Sebakwe resettlement area. Photo credit: John Bhurekeni.



so poor that classrooms were predominantly converted tobacco barns and animal feeding houses, teachers' accommodation was scarce, and sanitation facilities were nearly non-existent. Despite these revelations, the government continues to pretend that everything is all right.

It was in the context of these schools that I situated an open and participant driven exploratory case study aimed at transformative curriculum development and learner's development of critical reflexive thinking. The Afrophilic P4C study was constructed using a four-phase data collection framework: Phase 1 - document analysis, Phase 2 - formative intervention workshops, Phase 3 - Philosophy for Children session observations, and Phase 4 - reflective interviews. Furthermore, analytical tools that allowed for rigour and distanciation from the data and analysis process were developed. Since I was an insider-formative interventionist researcher, this allowed me to practise reflexivity and helped me regulate my own subjectivity.

As previously stated, the schools' curriculum is fragmented by the continuities of coloniality. To counter the resurgence of coloniality in my study, I kept myself aware of the three colonialities of power, knowledge, and being that could have affected my study, leading to processes of formulated 'thingfication' [Césaire, 2001]. The potential downside of

not addressing these forms of coloniality is that one will embrace thingfication processes and dehumanize their participants, which I did not want because my participants were already victims of social abjection.

Some takeaway points from my study

Undoubtedly, selecting the most important takeaways from a thesis that has been prepared over a span of five years is an uphill struggle. As a result, in this article, I draw attention to those that have fascinated me and established a connection between myself as a researcher and Earth Charter researchers. Our shared interest evolved in a collaboration to explore heritage-activated learning approaches via storytelling.



The author sharing some of the key findings from his study with a group of teachers at an assessment with living heritage workshop in Namibia [March 2024].



Firstly, we noted that curriculum decolonization and transformation, as developed in my study, is a multi-voiced, multi-age-grouped approach. It involved an open and participant-driven methodological approach that foregrounds multi-voicedness in research and curriculum innovation practice. In line with this is the fact that, while there are similarities regarding decolonial aims and objectives, ultimately the meanings, actualization, and challenges of decolonizing the curriculum varied depending on the context.

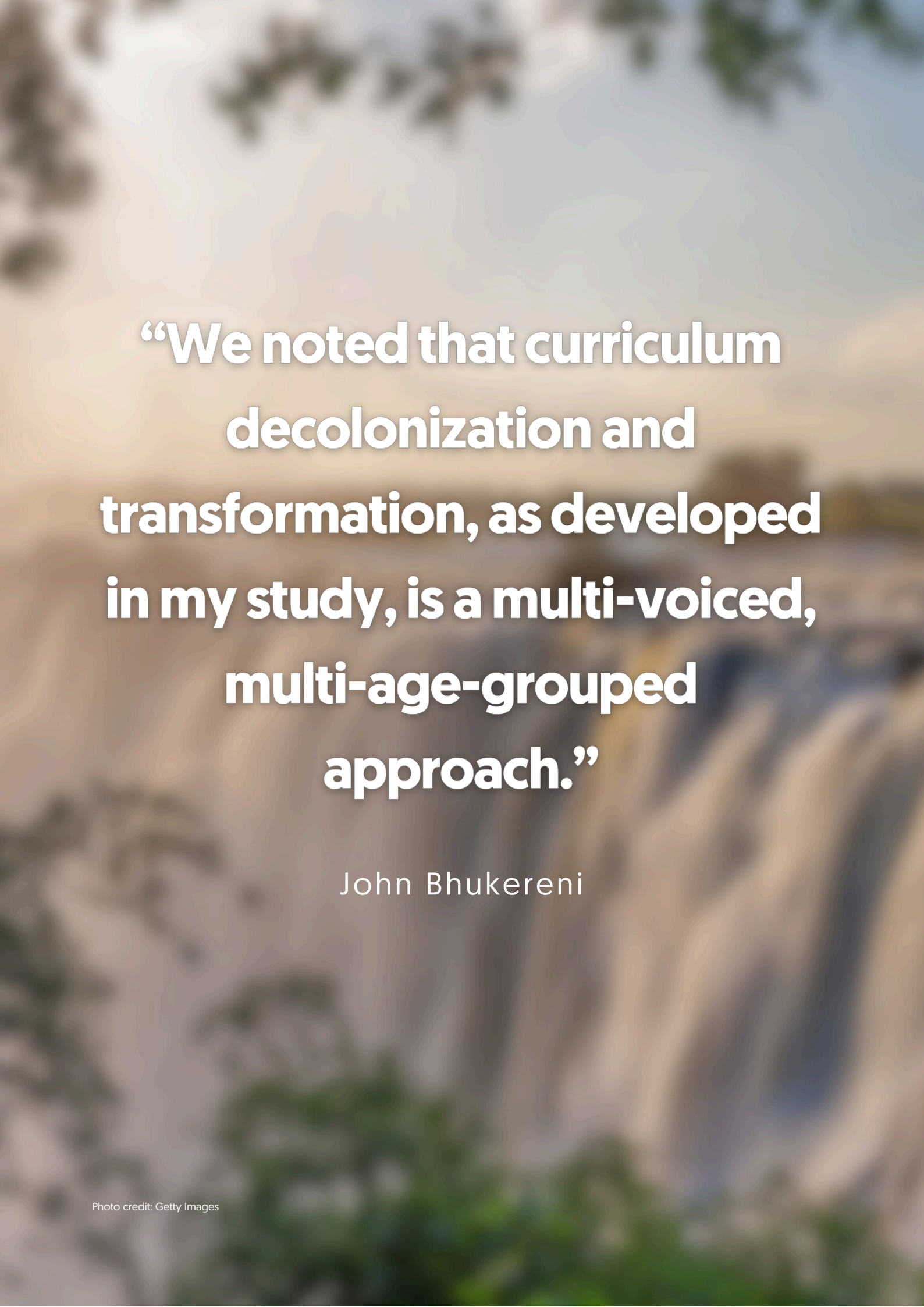
The sociocultural framing used in the study supports bringing children's heritage and cultural lens to bear on curriculum and pedagogical praxis. As a way of example, storytelling, which is an integral part of the African community, including the Sebakwe resettlement area, plays a critical role in improving learner-agency and development of ethical-reasoning. [As demonstrated from stories told in my study, the stories that are told in the African context personify animal characters, but again they are aimed at transmitting the virtues valued by the society.](#) Learner-agency is improved as the children are expected to participate with the storyteller as they listen to these stories, as most of them include musical mimicking.

Finally, I'd like you, the reader, to understand that the reflections I have shared with you are not my own. They are reflections on the people's decolonial initiatives to educate their children.

I confidently joined the journey and developed a decolonial approach to philosophy for children, which expanded primary school children's critical reflexive thinking skills and teachers' ability to creatively engage heritage-based curriculum. This is essentially because teachers, children, and parents were actively involved in selecting the most significant Afro-philic living heritage knowledge for integration in a philosophy for children curriculum.



The Great Zimbabwe Monuments are one of the most frequently visited heritage sites by schools in Zimbabwe. Photo credit: Getty Images



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John Bhukerani

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Author in 2014 with a group of Early Childhood Development (ECD) children on the day of the graduation. This marks their entry into main stream primary school grade one level.