Touching a Lion: Collaborative Agenda of Decolonizing Professoriate and Doctoral Status for Transformation in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Touching a lion is the scariest thing one could ever do, but sometimes one must do so to dismantle thorny issues that one hardly speaks about, such as professoriate and doctoral status. As universities are lacking numerous decolonizing aspects for transformation in higher education, the authors of this paper are of the view that professoriate and doctoral status needs to be decolonized to fulfil the transformation agenda in higher education. The theory of Ubuntu and collaboration, using a transformative paradigm, underpinned the study. The article presents a non-conventional method in the form of storytelling and reflecting on the authors' experiences in higher education in South Africa. Data were analyzed thematically. The findings of this study are that professors and doctors live in their own space where it is sometimes difficult to reach them. The study recommends the incorporation of Ubuntu and collaboration within the two statuses, which must be vital in decolonizing the status quo for transformation in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The decolonization of higher education is topical in most parts of Africa and other regions across the world that were once colonized. In South Africa, the decolonization of the higher-education curricula has taken center stage, particularly after the #FeesMustFall protests by university students in 2016 (Marongwe et al., 2020). Adam (2020) stated that since the 2015 and 2016 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student protests at South African universities, there has been renewed interest in themes of decolonization and social justice in education. The intention of this paper is to touch the lion by reflecting on how professoriate and doctoral status can be decolonized without compromising the quality of both in response to the call for the decolonization of knowledge. Coan (2018) believed that such decolonization requires self-reflection and an understanding of historical processes, as well as pedagogical restructuring. Dreyer (2017) argued that, although higher education was in the process of transformation, clearly much more needed to be done, further positing that if people were to look at higher education in South Africa through a decolonial lens, it is evident that higher education institutions have not yet been decolonized.

In this paper, we reflect on our journey to obtain doctoral qualifications. We observe that much has been said on the decolonization of university curricula, but little, if any, on the decolonization of the professoriate and doctoral status, a gap this paper intends to cover to contribute to the body of knowledge. Decolonization is key. Decolonization is the dismantling of colonization in all its forms, and one of the forms being neglected is the dismantling of professoriate and doctoral status.

People are still obsessed with getting a PhD qualification or a professorship status because this was and is a preserve of the few who are seen to be on their plane. Holders of PhDs and professorships used to be viewed as strong towers that stand up high and give light to the people down on the ground. They were disassociated from people and other academics and used to being given preferential treatment. The above perception is best described by Kwame Nkrumah, observing in his book *Consciencism* (cited in Maserumule, 2015) that "African intellectuals and professors are … anointed with a universalist flavouring which titillates the palate … so agreeably that they become alienated from their immediate society."

Additionally, those who might know that there are academic doctors are quick to think that they are male, not female. How can this be? One wonders whether being an academic doctor or professor has an impact on the lives of people in their communities. Could it be that, when they are awarded a PhD, they become untouchable or not easily reached? Is it not that they are supposed to make an impact and be influential in the communities in which they live? Maserumule (2015) argued that the transformation of higher education generally in Africa and specifically in South Africa requires a professoriate with a decoloniality posture and that currently the change of higher education is increasingly being pursued through the prism of decoloniality. This study aims to explore a task as frightening as touching a lion: the collaborative

agenda of decolonizing the professoriate and doctoral status for transformation in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Different scholars have defined decolonization in various ways, and much has been said about decolonization with the agenda of exposing the ills of colonialism (Matolino, 2020; Olsson, 2023) and what should be decolonized, such as curricula, academic freedom, leadership decolonization, pedagogies and methodologies, institutional culture (Badat, 2016), etc., but very little has been debated around decolonizing professoriate and doctoral status for transformation in higher education. We argue that professoriates and doctorates should not be like an ivory tower disconnected from the students that they are supposed to serve.

Olsson (2023) posed a question regarding how South African universities might succeed in decolonizing higher education curriculum without breaking academic freedom. In our search for answers, we also pose questions: How can higher education in South Africa be decolonized without decolonizing the professoriate and doctoral status? Who designs the university curricula? Who teaches the university curricula? Who writes or which literature/sources are used in South African universities? Who leads universities in South Africa? Is it possible to transform the curriculum without decolonizing the lion? This calls for a constructive engagement of all key stakeholders in higher education for these questions to be answered. Olsson (2023) argues that decolonization should be understood as a call for critical engagement with the established curriculum, hence this study.

Critical engagement is one of the six conceptions of decolonization coined by Jansen (2017a), describing how students should question the content of the established curricula freely without fear or prejudice. It encourages students to engage with knowledge by asking questions that were never asked before the decolonization of the curricula. Jansen (2017b) gives examples of critical questions focused on knowing where the information in the curriculum is from, serving whose interest or agenda, and what is included and excluded. Such questions call for the decolonization of the professoriate and doctorate for students to meaningfully engage in debates with them. There is a rift between professors/doctors and students because of the status; professors are found on one side of the curriculum and students on the far side of it. We argue that higher education should create and advocate for space that promotes mingling of students and supervisors to promote academic growth. This will be in sync with the critical human pedagogy that values Ubuntu (humanity) and empathy, thereby creating a rapport that allows co-production of knowledge between professors and students. It is our view that changing the status quo is difficult and often misinterpreted because people fear that their power, authority, and autonomy will be lost.

Ubuntu can have a positive impact when its principles are used effectively in an organization, with the potential to enhance teamwork and the sharing of skills and ideas (Msila, 2014). We argue that Ubuntu would make it easy for the students to tap into the expertise of

doctors and professors. We are of the view that decolonizing the professoriate and doctoral status quo will make students feel free and learn much from doctors and professors. Mahaye (2018) offers that Ubuntu has the potential to reconnect students with their teachers and with indigenous values, cultivating respect and cooperation among them. Letseka (2014) noted that embracing Ubuntu is about transforming old, exclusively authoritarian systems. Ngubane and Makua (2021) concur that Ubuntu can be used as a transformative approach when embraced with understanding and dignity.

Heleta (2018) argues for the decolonization of knowledge for narratives to be written and refocus the creation of knowledge that we think can be realized when the professoriate and doctoral status quo is decolonized or transformed to speak to Africanization values. Matos (2000) posits that the university academic staff as agents of change should contextualize the environment and culture, stimulating and guiding students in their search to understand reality. This can be achieved through dismantling the status quo of the professoriate and doctorate. The authors both firmly believe that the professoriate and doctoral level should be decolonized if the universities want to experience real transformation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Now that we are doctors and will be professors in the future, we want to see the difference in academia. We want to create a space in which a doctor or professor is a human being in the sense that people who are watching can reach up and find assistance and support. We are creating a space in which professors are known as people who have Ubuntu and can be easily reached. We want to see an area in which upcoming young academics will be inspired by doctors and professors who can come down to their level without losing their dignity. Nyathi (2016) argued that the only way to decolonize the curriculum is through the process of togetherness. Our position is that, if we are talking seriously about decolonization, we should work together, holding each other's hands.

This study is hinged on the philosophy of Ubuntu, which is an aspect that goes beyond kindness and recognizes the inner worth of every human being (Ngomane, 2019), linked with the collaboration theory, which is about collective minds sharing ideas and opinions to achieve a common goal (John-Steiner, 2006). We are talking about doctors and professors who not only research social justice, Ubuntu, and collaboration, among others, but those who advocate, live, and breathe Ubuntu and cooperation. For example, if we are advocating collaboration as leaders, are we ready to share power with other collaborators? Are we not threatened by knowing that we will make decisions based on collective minds? Are we willing to lose control? In this study, we want to transform the way people see academics just as we called for the transformation of university curricula. We want people to have evidence that doctors and professors are also human. They can laugh. They not only can show somebody how to conduct a research study but can also bring a smile and hope to people who have lost hope.

Globally, there are calls that universities should produce more doctoral graduates because a doctoral qualification, especially if by thesis, develops one's leadership skills and promotes independence and critical thinking. Faller (2020) commented that the thesis is not merely an end in itself but a representation of qualities and characteristics of an emerging researcher: stewardship of a field of study, independence, and capacity for leadership in an international research or professional community. We argue that such characteristics promoted by a doctoral qualification should benefit ordinary people by at least making themselves available to those who need academic guidance.

A serious revamp of the professoriate is needed, not just cosmetic changes advocated by academics who want to maintain the status quo. Garuba (2015) argued that, when talking about and engaging in reconceptualization and decolonization of the curriculum in South Africa, two approaches should be considered: "adding new items to an existing curriculum," and "rethinking how the object of study itself is constituted" and then reconstructing it and bringing about fundamental change. The same should happen for decolonizing the professoriate and doctoral status to address African epistemologies. Real change can be realized if Garuba's second approach is adopted and implemented.

This calls for a willingness to change by different role players in higher education to decolonize professoriate and doctoral status. Maserumule (2015) stated that the continent's professoriate was schooled mainly in the white tradition and that African academics may be reluctant to repudiate this. Our point is that a failure to change the professoriate and doctoral status is the failure to transform higher education that many South African university students cried for in the 2015 and 2016 #FeesMustFall protests. The above view can be equated to what Jansen stated, as cited in Heleta (2016): that the failure to increase the number of black academics and decolonize the curriculum promoted white supremacy and dominance, as well as the stereotyping of Africa. Jansen further argued that the failure of South African universities to decolonize had "left unchallenged the Achilles heel of white institutions: the kind of knowledge (and therefore authority) which is pushed on to African students as unquestionable truth and inscrutable value" (in Heleta, 2016). What is needed is a paradigm shift.

METHODOLOGY

A transformative paradigm unmasks the deep structures that are unobservable and destroys the myth and false knowledge and empowers other people to act to transform radically (Chilisa, 2012). We used a non-conventional method in the form of storytelling, which unravels the mysteries of the world in which we live, reflecting on our experiences in the universities in South Africa. We generated data through writing reflections on our experiences of the phenomenon and then asking each other probing questions. Later, we identified patterns, coding and categorizing, and themes emerged that are discussed below. The main research question that we asked was: What is the collaborative agenda of decolonizing professoriate and doctoral

status for transformation in higher education? The following are the sub-research questions that were asked:

- How can you describe the doctoral and professoriate status before you were a doctor or a professor?
- What is the present status quo of the doctoral and professoriate status in higher education?
- How would you prefer the doctoral and professoriate to be for transformation in higher education?

The themes that emerged from our written reflections

The aim of this study is to explore the collaborative agenda of decolonizing professoriate and doctoral status for transformation in higher education. The results from our reflections on the phenomenon reaffirmed to us that indeed there is a need to have a collaborative agenda of decolonizing the doctoral and professoriate status quo to change higher education. Our reflections are discussed below, according to the response to the sub-research questions mentioned above and the verbatims, as stated in the written reflections guided by the sub-research questions. Below are the themes that came from the reflections responding to the following sub-research question: How can you describe the doctoral and professoriate status before you were a doctor or a professor? Out of our reflections, the themes emerged, and the first theme is discussed below:

Theme 1: The lack of collaboration and Ubuntu in a doctor or a professor

The written reflections indicated that both of us noted that we grew up not knowing that there was another kind of doctor besides a medical doctor. Even today, when people hear that one is a doctor, the first thing that comes to their minds is a medical doctor, and this does not only happen among illiterate people but even among the educated. Below is what was revealed by each author's reflections:

Author 1 wrote, *"I grew up in a family where both parents were nurses and the only doctor that was talked about at home was a medical doctor. For a long time of my life, I was not aware of academic doctors."*

Author 2 wrote, *"In the early stages of my life, the only doctors that would come to my mind were medical doctors in hospitals and the family doctor that we used to consult when one was sick."*

We both reflected about ourselves as individuals (without PhDs), when we were still students, before we had a master's or PhD degree, and we hardly knew any doctors or professors. The only doctor with whom we had come close was a GP or family doctor. The professors we have come across were those who would be glued to the screens of their computers, busy typing and hardly looking around or speaking. If walking around, they would have serious faces, holding a briefcase, wearing spectacles, and walking gently. We grew up hearing stories that professors and academic doctors were not spending much time with their families, relatives, and friends but were always locked up in their study rooms. One would hardly

have a chat with a doctor or professor. For example, this is what came from the written reflections of each author about this issue:

Author 1 wrote, *"I remember starting to develop myself as a primary through distance learning from deep rural areas, I had no clue about higher institution space. I was only studying and writing assignments through distance learning. I started to realize that there were doctors and professors when graduating Bed Honors; otherwise in my college life, lecturers did not have such titles."*

Author 2 wrote, *"I did my undergraduate degree as a full-time student in higher education, but then I never had lecturers that had either Dr or Prof title. The doctors and professors I saw were always glued to their laptops hardly having conversations with the students."*

Out of what came through our reflections, we saw in the academic doctor and the professor people who were untouchable. Their seriousness and being far from the community they are serving made it difficult for us to come closer to them. In our eyes, they lacked the aspect of collaboration, which allows people to come closer to one another and to use collective minds and the sharing of ideas (John-Steiner, 2006), together with the aspect of Ubuntu that goes beyond kindness and recognizes the inner worth of every human being (Ngomane, 2019). As far as we felt, collaboration and Ubuntu did not exist within academics.

Theme 2: The lions within the academic doctor and the professor

In our reflections, we found that, in academia, coming closer to the doctors and professors and beginning to know them better happened when one was allocated a supervisor. This would depend on the kind of person he or she was. We both recall that our supervisor was reachable, as we had one supervisor, though we did not know each other then. This is what came from our reflections:

Author 1 wrote, *"It was during part-time lectures when I was doing my master's when I was able to come closer to a doctor who was my supervisor. And lucky for me, my supervisor was a wonderful person, very strict but very considerate. I would only hear from my peers the kind of treatment they receive from other supervisors."*

Author 2 wrote, *"My first experience of working close with a doctor was when I was allocated a supervisor; otherwise, when I was in higher education as an undergraduate student, I hardly had anything that made me to come closer to either a doctor or a professor."*

The experience of mingling with or rubbing shoulders with our supervisor was humbling, but this did not stop us from experiencing how other doctors and professors treated us in the same institution. We both attested that it was scary, a feeling we had to fight vehemently to be where we are today. We think other students could also attest to this feeling of knowing that you are fortunate to have a supervisor who has Ubuntu but very aware that he or she is the only one in the institution who makes you feel welcome. The experience was like there was a giant lion in the institution, and we would become numb and frozen. No one would dare touch a lion. Our reflections showed that before we became academics, we felt that the doctor and professor were more like lions to whom we could not come close, which is why there were fewer doctors

and professors then. Maserumule (2015) concurs, asserting that doctors and professors were alienated from their immediate societies. We are arguing that as long as doctors and professors still want to stay up there in their isolated space, the community will continue to see them as lions, as untouchable.

The last sub-research question was: How would you prefer the doctors and professoriate to be for transformation in higher education? The following theme emerged.

Theme 3: The faces of future doctors and professors in higher education

In response to the third sub-research question, we both think that working as academics in decolonizing the status quo of higher education can contribute to the transformation of higher education. One of the authors mentioned that she thinks the first aspect that needs to be changed is the mindset of academics who think that they can contribute to the transformation of higher education by writing articles only. She is of the view that action is the most critical aspect of change:

Author 1 wrote, "*In my view, only writing articles as an academic to contribute to the body of knowledge, I do not think can make a huge change in the transformation agenda. I believe we academics, our actions can speak volumes. For example, incorporating Ubuntu and work as a team with others including students is important*."

This is also reflected by Dreyer (2017), who argued that although higher education is in the process of transformation, clearly much more needs to be done. The same author further thinks that the faces of the academics need to be more relaxed and welcoming, with laughter and smiles from the heart. In literature reviewed in this paper, Mahaye (2018) postulates that Ubuntu has the potential to reconnect students with their teachers and indigenous values and cultivate respect and cooperation among them. Furthermore, Ngubane and Makua (2021) state that Ubuntu can be used as a transformative approach when embraced with the understanding and dignity, which is what we believe in as authors of this paper.

During the clarity-seeking questions when analyzing the reflections, Author 1 was asked to clarify her statement, and she further said she believes in peace and happiness, and if we are talking about Ubuntu, we cannot leave peace and joy from our discussion. Decolonizing the status quo in higher education goes beyond articles and research. Author 2 concurs and adds that we need to see active academics who do not only advocate for the plan of transformation but live transformation through their actions. Let the academics be concerned about the legacy they will leave as they leave the academic space. We both agree that we want to see the academics in the community working with teachers and learners in secondary schools to build future learners. We believe in a vibrant academic life that does not only live within the walls of higher education.

CONCLUSION

The current study aimed to explore a collaborative plan to decolonize the doctoral and professoriate status for transformation in higher education. The authors concluded that, as

much as it is scary to touch a lion—in this case, the doctoral and professoriate status—it is essential to talk about the issues that are not comfortable to talk about, as long as that is done for transformation in higher education. It is clear that something must be done to change the status quo in higher education, even if that makes the academics uncomfortable, because change has always been resisted. Academics must collaborate for transformation in higher education.

Recommendations

It was revealed in this study that academic life and space are isolated and lonely. Still, through the incorporation of collaboration and Ubuntu, the status quo can be changed for the better. The authors of this paper recommend that doctors and professors loosen up and practice laughing, smiling, and breathing peace in the space of higher education.

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