Perspectives of curriculum regulatory authorities on adopting a decolonized curriculum in Uganda: a case of National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC)

***Florence Kirabo Nampijja**

Kabale University, Uganda

ABSTRACT

The ongoing African renaissance and the decolonization imperatives are inviting Africans to reconsider the role of Africa ways of knowing as a way of decolonizing curriculum. Like other countries in Africa, Uganda needs an education that uses local experiences, realities, values and languages to create a lifelong impact on the masses. The ongoing colonial education was aimed at training low and middle level workers for government and missionary service and therefore the skills and competences promoted by such an education do not match with those required by contemporary demands. This explains why despite the increasing number of universities and tertiary institutions, and having many graduates (at least 400,000 per annum) Kamuhanda J(2022), the productivity of the nation in many sectors is still low. It is not clear if Uganda's education regulatory authorities like NCDC, NCHE, ESA support and therefore consider a move towards a home grown / endogenous / decolonized curriculum. Hence, the study aimed at finding the perspectives of NCDC's technical staff on curriculum transformation with in a decolonized framework. The study used questionnaires and review of NCDC's literature to find views of technical staff (curriculum specialists) at NCDC. Findings showed that the ongoing curriculum transformation at NCDC was aimed at "reducing content overload and contact hours while fostering learners centered pedagogy and promoting a competence based approach while maintaining knowledge acquisition as the core aim for teaching and learning. The transformation ignores local knowledge and methods of enhancing the identified critical thinking skills, creativity, collaboration and others; moreover many Ugandan schools do not have the equipment for practice to enhance such skills. It is contrary to pre-colonial curriculum which used local available means and aimed at instilling positive attitudes and behavior, inculcation of ethical, emotional, relational, practical and technical skills. One can therefore conclude that regulatory authorities in Uganda have not considered decolonization frames at the moment.

Keywords: Curriculum decolonization; Pre-colonial curriculum; Education regulatory authorities, Uganda

Introduction

Quality education is no longer measured by mere gaining of knowledge but by acquisition, contextualization and application of knowledge to one's location. To achieve this, education curriculum must be situated in both local and global realities. In other words, curriculum must be decolonized if it to positively impact the nation economically, socially, culturally and ethically. Curriculum decolonization in such a case would mean that what is taught, who teaches, how it is taught (methodology), for whom it is taught and the goals of teaching (relevance) must be anchored in the relevant indigenous cultural norms but should as well not be disengaged from global realities.

Curriculum regulatory authorities are usually autonomous arms of government responsible for regulating what is taught in a country or a region. In Uganda, NCDC is a body responsible for the designing, piloting, rolling out, and supervision of the implementation of curriculum at Early Childhood Education, Primary, Secondary, and vocational level. Several curriculum reviews and changes have been done by NCDC. The purpose of the most recent review of the lower secondary school curriculum according to the Amended circular NCDC 1/2020 (January, 2020: was: "to reduce content over load, contact hours in the classroom, fostering learner centered pedagogy, competence based approach and criterion referenced assessment" The key features of the new curriculum thus included: strong foundations for learning, life and work; learning with understanding skills in applying knowledge; excellence on-going progress, building foundations in the early, middle, later, years and prioritizing core learning. Whereas these are good drivers for change and features, they are not anchored in endogenous local realities and knowledge and do not aim at real curriculum transformation and are far from changing the quality of Ugandan finalists at each level in terms of what they know in relation to their localities/ society and the applicability of knowledge because curriculum is not situated particularly in Ugandan realities. It is also not clear whether NCDC while making these reviews and changes in the curriculum recognized the importance of decolonized frames, pedagogies and ontologies. The purpose of the study therefore was to find out the perspectives of NCDC's curriculum specialists on adopting a decolonized curriculum in Uganda.

Statement of the problem

Ideally, meaningful design and review of curriculum would be anchored and situated in the pedagogies that portray much of endogenous norms, values, systems and beliefs. Some countries from Africa and elsewhere in the world like South Africa and New Zealand are shifting away from colonial curriculum and are adopting a home grown curriculum. In Uganda, some curriculum reforms have been done by NCDC for example, the thematic curriculum, reducing the number of subjects, adopting a competence based curriculum at lower secondary level and recently the abridged curriculum.

Despite all the changes, Ugandan curriculum is still mainly anchored in European world views and grossly ignores and undermines Uganda's indigenous epistemic roots, norms, values, beliefs, science, ethics, cultures and beliefs. The graduates of the Ugandan curriculum have thus failed to impact the nation in terms of economic, social, ethical, and cultural development because what they study is not rooted in the reality they live. The curriculum appears irrelevant. It is envisaged that adopting a decolonized curriculum would change the impact of education on the nation since it considers other (endogenous) ways of knowing that is tied to local realities. The study therefore sought to find the perspectives of Uganda's curriculum regulatory authorities on adoption of a decolonized curriculum with specific reference to the National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC).

Objectives

The objective of the study was to find out the perspective of the curriculum regulatory authorities on adopting a decolonized curriculum in Uganda.
Two research questions were used to collect data:
i)   How do staffs at NCDC understand curriculum decolonization?
ii)   How do NCDC staffs perceive the benefits of adopting a decolonized curriculum?

Theoretical framework: decolonization theory

The study was underpinned by the decolonization theory. Decolonization theory in the African context situates the freeing of African epistemic systems from the colonial framework that currently defines African education horizons. This theory forms the theoretical framework that underpins this study because it provides a justification for a transformed curriculum that considers varied ways of knowing. Adopting the ideas of the theory can help to examine NCDCs' curriculum technical staff perspectives around the problem area.

Relating to education, proponents of the decolonization theory emanating from all corners dominated by colonial epistemologies like Africa, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere are particularly against what they refer to as epistemic colonization (Adebisi, 2016; Le Grange, 2016; Heleta, 2016; Mbembe, 2016, Garuba, 2015; De Carvalho and Florez- Florez, 2014; Smith, 1999; Ngugi, 1981) and cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2000:192). Cognitive imperialism, according to Battiste (2000:192), "is the imposition of one world view on a people who have an alternative world view with the implication that the imposed world is superior to the alternative world view". On the other hand, Mbembe (2016:36) defines epistemic colonialism as the "endless production of theories that are based on European traditions". Uganda is one of the nations which relegated its indigenous education system (what to teach, who to teach, how to teach and the goals of teaching) to the periphery and have solely adopted a westernized approach in terms of knowledge, methods and evaluation. In this regard, the decolonization struggles are against education exclusivist and the intended disappearance of particular knowledge from the shelves of knowledge in the world. They are thus struggling for the awakening of knowledge perspectives that have been relegated by colonial hegemony through indoctrinating and supporting aboriginals to love and utilize their local knowledge (Dei, 2010; Mignolo, 2010). In view of this, Simpson, (2001:140) argues that,

> we have a right to be at the table using the knowledge inside of ourselves to make decisions that impact our people, our communities, the plants, the animals and our lands. We do not want other people deciding which components of our knowledge are important and which are not. We do not want scientists interpreting our knowledge, when it has been removed from the values and spiritual foundations that give it meaning.

Advocates of the decolonization struggle aim at and envisage the triumphalism of indigenous knowledge over other (Eurocentric) knowledge in countries where epistemic colonialism has occurred. Uganda is expected to follow suit

Literature review

The concept of curriculum decolonization

Decolonizing curriculum or what Adyanga, (2014: 48) calls adopting "a well-grounded indigenous African education system that feeds the body, soul and mind of the learner" with relevant, practical knowledge. It is a complex process that requires the efforts of every able individual in the country. It means the elimination of elements of epistemic and cognitive imperialism from the curriculum; the inclusion of relevant educative cultural views in the curriculum. It involves the removal of neocolonial hegemonies in the minds of the people through adopting the world views, pedagogies and policies preferably those framed by indigenous norms, values, systems, beliefs and customs. It relates so much

to "doing away with pedagogies and curriculum which serves to define or portray Eurocentric realities". (Oviawe, 2013:60).

Curriculum decolonization requires consideration for varied ways of knowing (epistemic freedom). Due consideration must be given to local social, ethical, scientific and cultural knowledge (Adyanga, 2014; Moeke- Pickering (2010). To do it better, curriculum decolonization must begin with decolonizing the mind (Seehawer, (2018).

Other scholars believe that decolonizing education begins in the institutions of learning, particularly in the classroom. According to Lebeloane (2017:1), "the starting point of decolonizing curriculum is in the school and classroom that I regard as the formal education laboratories for equity and justice in a formal society". Oelofsen, 2015's view does not differ from Lebeloane's view except that Oelofsen believes that the purpose of decolonizing institutions first or what she collectively calls "decolonizing the intellectual landscape" (2015: 130) is to ease decolonization of the mind. Oelofsen's idea is important because the task of decolonizing curriculum is complex and requires synergies.

Whereas decolonizing curriculum is a catch term and a necessity for many nations today, it has its associated challenges. The biggest challenge to decolonization is the adoption of market models by players in many sectors; and in this case, the education sector. The market models have obliged academic actors like: the academics, parents, students and policy-makers to act in ways that are competitive, individualistic and entrepreneurial. The neoliberal orientations demonstrated by education stakeholders go very much against the decolonization of education. For instance, they have succeeded in abolishing the teaching and learning of subjects that are intended to educate for the public sphere and for civil society, for example, critical Social Sciences and social ethics because they are not for profit (Giroux, 2002; Lynch, 2006).

Methodology

The main research question that guided the study was: What are the perspectives of curriculum regulatory authorities on the adoption of a decolonized curriculum in Uganda? The study considered curriculum specialists at the National Curriculum Development Center as respondents, therefore a case study design was used. A qualitative approach was used because it relies on the interpretation and perception of the subject being studied. (Cresswel,2014). The constructivism paradigm through the qualitative approach allowed the researcher to construct contextual rich visions from curriculum specialists (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). The sample selection was guided by the fact that the selected sample had to "provide clarity insight and understanding" (Neuman, 2014: p 247) of the issue at hand. Purposive sampling was thus considered to be more appropriate for qualitative studies (Amin, 2005). According to Diaz, (2015:104), "Purposive sampling is characterized by the incorporation of specific criteria met by participants at the moment of selection" In other words, participants must have experience about the phenomenon under examination. Purposive sampling, therefore, aided the choice of the respondents; and thus all curriculum specialists at NCDC were targeted. Views about adoption of a decolonized curriculum were sought from curriculum specialists in Uganda.

A total of fifteen (15) curriculum specialists participated in the study as respondents. 80% of these had served in the capacity of curriculum specialist for a period of over five (5) years and were above 40 years of age. Using a questionnaire and a documentary analysis guide, answers to the research questions were sought. Documentary Analysis allowed me to study public documents (Creswell, 2012) such as reports, website, working papers, course curriculum and policies about curriculum. I read and analyzed such documents to obtain relevant information relating to curriculum development at NCDC. This activity was important because as Shelton, (2004:66) writes, "documents provide a background and explain the attitudes and behavior of the group under scrutiny". NCDC documents therefore provided the background to the study, described the processes and basis for curriculum design.

The interpretivist paradigm guided by the research purpose and the decolonization theory were used as a lens for data analysis.

Presentation of findings

To answer question one, (how NCDC technical staff understood curriculum decolonization), a number of questions on the questionnaire guide were answered. All participants (100%) had heard about the term curriculum decolonization before but they had divergent understanding of the term. 50% of the respondents said that curriculum decolonization meant doing away with western education and returning to the Stone Age ideals of education. One participant said

> "I relate curriculum decolonization to political decolonization; therefore, to me it means doing away with European methods, textbooks, topics and studying about Europe and other non-Ugandan knowledge".
> Others (25%) stated that the concept involved dismissing other (e.g. Eurocentri)c topics from the curriculum while replacing it with localized knowledge. A respondent stated "it is place based education. An education with connection to where it takes place" In a similar tone, 10% noted that curriculum decolonization meant broadening what is taught in line of local knowledge. These didn't believe that decolonizing curriculum required dismissing of some components of the current curriculum; but believed in incorporation of other views. 15% believed it was community education informed by what elders and cultural leaders considered important only.

Asked if in their view curriculum decolonization was important and beneficial to the nation, (research question two) 50% thought it was necessary since it was inclusive. One respondent said, "it brings about local realities into perspective". Another said, "it makes education more relevant since it is cultural based". Others (32%) thought it was not required in this global village. Participants with such views thought that the world has gone away from concentration on mere cultural /tribal/ and regional beliefs; and "we now look at the globe in totality" therefore, decolonizing curriculum won't change anything. Another participant was of the view that curriculum decolonization is "a regressive and dull view of education". Participants with such views thought that whoever supported a decolonized curriculum was an enemy of quality education in Uganda. These also had a feeling that adoption of a competence based curriculum was good enough for education to cause growth and development.

Others (18%) were skeptical about adopting a decolonized curriculum because according to them, it did not rhyme well with the goals of Uganda's education and would also bring about divisive curriculum since it promoted inclusion of local realities into the curriculum. Participants with such views believed

that it would be very hard to adopt a decolonized curriculum and its adoption would disorganize the education system. Participants in this category were not sure if a decolonized curriculum would serve the taste of the consumers of education since it is rooted in pre-colonial knowledge.

Data gathered from the NCDC documents and website shows that the idea of curriculum decolonization is invisible in the programs of NCDC.

Discussion of findings

From the findings, two themes were evident:

Divergent perspectives about curriculum decolonization by curriculum specialists

From the above descriptions of a decolonized curriculum, it is obvious that Uganda's curriculum specialists had diversified perspectives about curriculum decolonization. There was lack of a unified view of a decolonized curriculum and therefore it would require serious interventions such as workshops if NCDC was to consider it. This finding relates well with what earlier researchers like Lebeloane, 2017 and Oelofsen, (2015) concluded. The duo advocated for decolonizing the "intellectual land scape" Oelofsen, (2015:130) if curriculum is to be decolonized. By intellectual landscape, policy makers, curriculum specialists, education regulators, assessment bodies, teachers and academics should have their mindsets decolonized before the actual process of curriculum decolonization. This is again in line with what Seehawer, 2018 noted that decolonization must begin from the mind. In Uganda, it means that curriculum specialists and should decolonize their minds before any other entity.

Misconceptions about curriculum decolonization by the curriculum specialists

Another important aspect to distill from the findings is that majority of the participants (curriculum specialists) had misconceptions about curriculum decolonization and a simple majority had a negative mindset about the issue. Some participants lacked detailed understanding and therefore had negative perceptions of the meaning of curriculum decolonization. The fact that some curriculum specialists consider curriculum decolonization as a backward, Stone Age idea, regressive and a dull view of education; and others related a decolonized curriculum to poor quality and divisive education confirms what earlier scholars concluded that there is epistemic and cognitive imperialism going on in the minds of African intellectuals (Adebisi, 2016; Mbembe, 2016; Smith, 1999). The finding again proves the suggestion of the advocates of the decolonization theory who push for the freeing of African minds from the bondages of euro centrism. This is very appropriate for Uganda's curriculum regulators.

Lack of interest of understanding the true meaning curriculum decolonization

From the responses, it was evident that many curriculum specialists wanted to retain the status quo. They felt that curriculum developers had already adopted the competence based curriculum and therefore not necessary to decolonize curriculum. These were particular influenced by neoliberal demands such as competitiveness, cost sharing, privatization and individualism which is so much against decolonizing curriculum. This view is also held by earlier researchers like Giroux, (2002) and Lynch, (2006).

Invisibility of the ideals of curriculum decolonization at NCDC

Document analysis showed that curriculum decolonization was not a matter on the agenda of NCDC and therefore was far from being thought about. Many documents reviewed have identified other methods like reduction of subjects, making it more learner centered and others but not adoption of other epistemic versions

Conclusion

The study sought to find the perspectives of curriculum regulatory authorities on adopting a decolonized curriculum in Uganda. Using the case of National curriculum Development Center, the researchers conclude that there are mixed perceptions about curriculum decolonization by curriculum specialists in Uganda. They also conclude that there is need for workshops and seminars to enhance understanding of the concept of curriculum decolonization. It was again concluded that Uganda's curriculum cannot be decolonized unless the perceptions of the education actors like curriculum specialists is unified and their mindset changed to support the idea. In other words, adoption of a decolonized curriculum is far from reality in Uganda.

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