



The Decolonisation of Education

SPEAKING NOTES

BY

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Programme Director,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
(All protocol observed).

This dialogue (discussion) today takes place on a day that is globally commemorated as International Women's Day. A friend of mine sent me a WhatsApp message that I would like to share with you. It reads: "Happy International Women's Day to all the ladies. You are valued. God richly bless you for moving nations forward, 8th March".

I align myself with the words of our President Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa when he said that this year, 8 of March will be dedicated to Mama Albertina Sisulu's Centenary. Had she been alive, she would be turning 100 years old.

And this dialogue taking place during the month of March which is Human Rights month. It is so because of the events of 21 March 1969 when people who were protesting against Pass Law were massacred in Sharpsville. The people were demanding the Freedom of movement. Pass laws were restricting and denying Africans the right to move freely from one place to another. The

word 'Pass' meant that a person was restricted from passing from one place to another.

You dare were found to be at a place different from where you were restricted to, without permission or authority, you would be arrested, convicted and sentenced to hard labour. At the end of your imprisonment, you would be deported back to your original place of residence and your Pass Book would be endorsed accordingly by placing a red stamp to indicate that you transgressed the Pass laws.

Another right that Africans were denied was education. A campaign to collect the demands from the people through the length and breadth of our country culminated in the adoption of the Freedom Charter at Kliptown Soweto on 26 June 1955.

Allow me to borrow the text in one of the clauses of the Freedom Charter which proclaims: "the doors of learning and culture shall be opened". Most of the clauses of the Freedom Charter now found articulation in the Bill of Rights of our Constitution. For instance, Section 29 of the Constitution makes provision for the right to education.

I say it is fundamental since it is a societal issue affecting mostly, the young generation of our country.

In his book titled: "*I Write What I Like*", Steve Biko speaks of the notion of identity and more so, the notion of being black when he says:

*"...being black is not a matter of pigmentation – being black is a reflection of a mental attitude."*¹

I shall elaborate why I mention Steve Biko in a moment. Against this backdrop I shall reflect on the discourse on transformation or decolonisation efforts made over the last few years. There have been calls for the decolonisation of thought,

¹ Biko S *I Write What I Like* (1987).

knowledge and education – broadly and precisely in the institutions of higher learning.

In April 2015 we witnessed the statue of Cecil John Rhodes being removed from the University of Cape Town. The statue has been seen as a catalyst upon which university students across the country have organised themselves to what is now known as the #RhodesMustFall and thereafter saw the birth of its cousin #FeesMustFall.

Why has this been important? This movement has been fundamental in espousing an uncomfortable debate on the ‘decolonisation’ of education and the acceleration of structural changes in SA’s universities.

When focusing on colonisation, my view is that it created structures that perpetuated unequal systems and has necessitated a ‘radical’ shift from the Bantu education system to one premised on equity, fairness, human dignity and freedom.

One may ask why and why now? Perhaps, we ought to take a leaf from the conceptual framework of what decolonisation means in general and what it means for education to be precise.

In my view, the decolonization project is at the heart of transformation – like a mantra - aimed at redressing continued colonial and Apartheid structures that have marginalized the majority of the country.

Largely, the concerns of the decolonisation movement is how curriculum content is dominated by – to name some – white, male, Western, capitalist, heterosexual, European world views.² This means the content under-represents and undervalues the perspectives, experiences, epistemologies of those who do not fit into these mainstream categories.

² For instance, legal philosophy is dominated by the likes of John Locke, Aristotle, and Johannes Voet. These Dutch jurists remain the most authoritative in the Roman Dutch/ common law jurisdictions and legal tradition.

A lot of young people have bemoaned that the teaching of curricula is done in oppressive classrooms by academics who are demeaning, unprofessional and use their power in ways that discriminate unfairly against students.

This challenge has received very little attention in the recent debates on “decolonisation”. It is the way in which the curriculum at every point – from who gets admitted, who thrives, who survives, who fails – mirrors back the historical and current unequal distribution of educational resources in the broader society.

We all know about the Bantu Educational system which was designed to continue the oppressive legacy of apartheid as education was viewed as a part of the broad apartheid system including the ‘homelands’, urban restrictions, pass laws and job reservation.

Marginalisation by a system of segregated and unequal education in the country fundamentally designed an unequal socio-political landscape which similarly gave birth to a long legacy. Even today, this legacy transcends through race and culture in our institutions, heritage and identity. An education system which was engineered to reduce people of colour to perpetual inferiority.

Let us recall what the architect of the Bantu Education, Dr Verwoerd, said:

“Natives (blacks) must be taught from an early age that equality with Europeans (whites) is not for them....There is no space for him (the ‘Native’) in the European Community above certain forms of labor. For this reason it is of no avail for him to receive training which has its aim in the absorption of the European Community, where he cannot be absorbed. Until now he has been subjected to a school system which drew him away from his community and misled him by showing him the greener pastures of European Society where he is not allowed to graze.”³

³ Kallaway at 92. Quotation of Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd (Minister of Native Affairs and Education section) who engineered the Bantu Education Act (1953).

In the contemporary education discourse, there are debates on the 'decolonisation of knowledge and thought'. Central to this discourse is the call for courageous leadership from young people, the youth of our nation to continuously engage in open dialogue. These young people realised at an early age the importance of resistance – language – heritage and identity. These values go to the core of being human.

Consequently, our constitution has recognised a number of languages as official languages besides Afrikaans and English. I dare say: our constitution provides us with a foundation to decolonize education – legal education which is premised on equality, freedom and human dignity.

The events of June 16 have had a profound inter-generational foundation for the post-apartheid education landscape in South Africa. The foundation built on the spirit of resistance. In my view, the decolonization project is at the heart of transformation – like a mantra - aimed at redressing continued colonial and Apartheid structures that have marginalized the majority of the country.

Many courses are imparted in lecture halls perceived as domineering by academics who may also be perceived as demeaning, unprofessional and use their positions to discriminate unfairly against students.

I note especially the development of 'Ubuntu' as an African theory of justice and therefore, I insist that our constitution provides us with a framework to develop a curriculum fit for purpose, context and your generation.

Most of the institutions of higher learning have maintained their legacies from the pre-Apartheid era and therefore, they are seen as barriers to a decolonised curricular. Linked to this decolonisation process is heritage, culture and identity. It reflects on who we are as a society.

I dare challenge our youth: 'liberate your minds through education, let us not retrogress but liberate our communities and our country. Education is a constitutional right which must be accessible.

To conclude, I note, appreciate and am encouraged by the works of the likes of Pedro Tabensky, Sally Matthews, Thando Njovane and Amanda Hlengwa in their collection titled: "*Being at Home*" where they deal with issues of race, institutional culture and transformation at South African Higher education Institutions.

I thank you.