



## Teaching for social justice: Importance of including Adolescent Literature with an Afrocentric context in the South African English Language Curriculum

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review literature to understand the importance of including Adolescent Literature with an Afrocentric context in the English Language Curriculum. Its focus is on how crucial it is that the prescribed literary network for English Language learners, particularly grade 12 learners, mirror the geographical and social realities of learners, and promote local knowledge and heritage in local contexts while being sensitive to global imperatives. The theoretical frameworks of Decolonization, Afrocentricity, and Identity form the foundation of this argument as they are linked with the National Curriculum Statement's principle of social transformation which motivated this writing, teaching literature for social transformation. The findings of this review revealed that teaching literature that is age appropriate and reflects learners' life experiences and history, in terms of geographical and social realities, can help learners understand literature and encourage reading. This review recommends further empirical research on Afrocentrism in education and the teaching of Adolescent Literature in South African contexts in the hopes that it would encourage South African network selectors to consider selecting Adolescent Literature with an Afrocentric context for South African English Language learners.

**Keywords:** Afrocentricity; Adolescent literature, Identity, Cultural Backgrounds, Prescribed Literature

## Introduction

The South African National Curriculum Statement (NCS) Grades R to 12 aims to ensure that children acquire and apply knowledge and skills in ways that are meaningful to their own lives, through an emphasis on the importance of promoting knowledge in local contexts and recognising or acknowledging the rich history and heritage of South Africa, while being sensitive to global imperatives. Our national curriculum is also based on principles such as, social transformation, which means redressing the educational imbalances of the past and providing equal educational opportunities for all learners (CAPS 2010). The foreword in the National Curriculum Statement states that the current national curriculum is the culmination of efforts to transform the curriculum bequeathed to South Africans by apartheid (CAPS 2010).

The first interest of this paper is to highlight that the aims and principles of the NCS, and the foreword of the minister of Basic Education are not wholly reflected in South Africa's English Curriculum. The second one is to explore why teaching Adolescent literature with an Afrocentric context would be an indication of steps toward social transformation through the curriculum as well as encouraging active learner participation during literature lessons.

Adolescence is a reality of the learners in schools across South Africa, they are at a stage of trying to find themselves and their place in their families, school, and society, and establish their identities, but this is not mirrored by the prescribed literary texts in the curriculum.

The current list of prescribed literature has not moved away from what was prescribed in 2009-2011 which Silverthorne (2011) described as a Eurocentric core curriculum. The literature taught in South African English classrooms continues to promote European literature over African literature and does not acknowledge the age and realities of the learners by introducing Adolescent literature, that is imbued in with themes that are unique to a South African context and depicts contemporary realities about South Africans.

## Theoretical Framework

According to Trepte and Loy (2017); Asante (2003), the theory of Afrocentricity is one that seeks to re-

locate the African person as an agent of human history to eliminate any ideas that he or she is not agent of human history. Afrocentricity seeks to bring Africans back to themselves, individuals with a rich culture, heritage, and firm identity. African literature is distinct from European literature because the Western orientated themes found in European literature deviate from African values, given that they relate to their socio-cultural behaviour characteristic or typical to western world (Umar and Gar 2021). In contrast, African norms and values are aimed at teaching learners' African culture which is often embedded in the spirit of communalism (Umar and Gar 2021).

Considering this, I believe that teaching literature with an Afrocentric context means teaching literature that acknowledges the heritage, culture and circumstances or experiences of the learners who are taught this literature. Literature with a South African context should be imbued with themes that are typical of South Africa, its people, and its socio-cultural problems. For example, corruption, gender-based violence, diversity, and the geographical locations that South Africans live in (Umar and Gar 2021). When selecting literature, relevance should not be mistaken for representation; learners can easily relate to themes like self-reliance but that is where it ends when the setting, the characters' cultures or circumstances do not mirror the learners' personal experiences or the experiences of those close to them.

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## Methodology

According to Draper (2004), any new research study should be built upon an existing body of knowledge. A researcher must examine what evidence already exists with respect to their enquiry. This paper is based on existing literature and studies on Adolescent Literature, and teaching literature with an Afrocentric context and the cultural background of the country or place that that literature is taught in.

### A decolonised approach to teaching literature in South Africa and Africa

According to Johansson (2018), Decolonisation is delinking from an imposed narrative, and not merely a critique of the social construct of race or capitalism. The legacy of colonialism or imperialism on African people is them knowing little about their heritage and contributions to the knowledges of the world, and disorientation in terms of their culture and identity (Asante 2003). Colonization destructed and undervalued people's cultures, history, geography, and education, amongst other things, and elevated those of the coloniser (Thiongó 1986). Therefore, to Africans, decolonisation means critically investigating the implications of colonialism and how colonialism disenfranchised Africans by disrupting the systems that continue to disenfranchise African people like the education system.

Debates about what literature should be taught in schools, colleges, and universities of African countries go as far back as the late 1950s, since the independence of countries like Ghana (Leshoai 1990). African countries agreed that the literature to be studied in their countries had to be relevant to the needs and requirements of Africa. Ngugi wa Thiongó expresses this in his comment "On the Abolition of The English Department" (Ashcroft et al. 1995) by saying that Africans want the establishment of a Department of African Literature and Languages that will enable Africa to be at the centre and not as an appendix or satellite of other countries, so things can be seen from the African perspective (Ashcroft et al. 1995). This stance was taken because colonisation burdened African learners and students with the study of foreign literature (English literature) which they did not understand and were therefore forced to study by rote – memorising to pass exams (Leshoai 1990).

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European literature could be challenging for many African learners, particularly because of the cultural distance between the texts and the readers' lived experiences. Therefore, it became boring, uninteresting, and meaningless to learners and students in Africa. The resolution made after some of the African countries won their independence was that schools had to teach literature which learners could relate to and enjoy but, most importantly, Afrocentric literature. Yet they were not promoting throwing out literary texts with European, American, or other contexts (Leshoai 1990), because the aim was not to dismantle what already existed but to recognise and highlight African cultures and heritage and to introduce texts that learners would understand and relate to (Lillis 1986). Johansson (2018), argues that by decolonising literature we ask not only what literature is, but also whose literature? Whose literature do we conceive as significant or more valuable and why? Then we possibly can move away from Eurocentrism to a different narrative where no knowledge is superior to another.

### The study of literature in South African schools

The study of literature in South African schools has always been a significant component of the language curriculum especially at the Further Education and Training (FET) phase, as a component that enhances reading skills. 'Literature Study' is repeated throughout the CAPS

teaching plan and warrants a two-and-a-half-hour examination (Kromhout and Scheckle 2021). However, beyond enhancing reading skills and preparing learners to write and pass their Literature exam; it is acknowledged that teaching literature in schools is important because it helps learners understand people, societies, historical events, and cultures (Beach 2020). The literary texts read by learners have the potential to change their sense of self and their perception of the world and the people around them (Schrijvers et al 2016). It is also important to note that literature can portray the status quo or argue for a reorganisation of society (Beach 2020).

Teaching literature in schools matters because learners can reflect on the world and think about how to reshape it into the world they deserve (Beach, Appleman and Simon 2016) but how much more impactful would learning literature be for South African learners if they were taught literature that represented them, in terms of heritage, culture, circumstances and age, and provided them with opportunities to reflect and grow? It is for these reasons that it is important to acknowledge that text selection is a crucial component in making literature a distinct tool for language acquisition, self-enrichment, and cultural appreciation (Samat et al. 2021).

### **Identity formation through literature**

An African philosopher, Alexis Kagame views identity as static, suggesting that one's identity is derived from predetermined metaphysical structures. Just as Aristotle views identity as static, each person has one authentic "inner self", and therefore identity formation is about finding one's true inner identity and working to align that identity with one's life path (Haertling et al. 2017). As individuals go through life, they adopt various identities through interactions with other people or facing pressures from society and culture. The theory of Social Identity proposes that individuals categorise themselves as belonging to various groups that are determined by factors such as age, gender, or even nationality (Trepte and Loy 2017). Notably, identity development is associated with adolescence, a key developmental period in which people experience identity crises and work to resolve identity confusion (Haertling et al. 2017). Learners in high school are at the stage of their lives where they

are faced with many identity challenges and are consistently searching for where they belong and who they are, therefore, the teaching of literature in school should be deeply entrenched in the view of adolescents as people amid autonomous identity development, a development that can be nurtured through literature instruction (Haertling et al. 2017).

### **Teaching Adolescent literature**

According to Cart (2008), Adolescent literature refers to literary texts set in the real contemporary world and addressing problems, issues, and life circumstances of interest to children in adolescence. These literary texts often illustrate and reflect changes that take place in society as the characters negotiate a sense of identity, and position of power within the various institutions they live in. Through the texts, authors have been found to often encourage the reader to question and even reject the status quo and to tackle issues that would normally be seen as contradictory or complex (Inggs 2015). Adolescent literature presents itself as an invaluable source of texts for learners to deepen their understanding of the intricate relationships between Self, Other and the world with enhanced sociocultural knowledge as well as affective and cognitive development (Sun 2022).

### **Discussion of Relevant Studies**

While the theoretical argument strongly supports the integration of Afrocentric adolescent literature for social transformation, the existing scholarly review upon which this argument is built highlights a crucial limitation in the available empirical evidence. There are not sufficient studies on adolescent literature in South Africa and Africa. The studies currently cited to support the connection between cultural relevance, textual engagement, and identity are predominately drawn from research conducted in Malaysia. The first relevant study is Samat et al. (2021)'s study on the voice of learners on English literary texts in Malaysian schools. The focus of this study was assessing the appropriateness of literary texts used by high school learners in terms of their ages, linguistic needs, and cultural backgrounds. It is important to note, before we get into the discussion of this study, its findings or relevance to this study, that the Malaysian Education Ministry only mandated the

inclusion of literature in the curriculum in Malaysia in March 2000. According to Samat et al. (2021), the selected texts for literature could be ones written by local authors or translated foreign literary works. However, the absence of literary texts that deal with issues beyond the conventional norm, such as wars and a sense of nationalism for one's country or homeland was evident in the text selection (Samat et al. 2021). Literary texts that were selected were not within local and cultural boundaries regardless of their importance. For instance, a text about war would have been appropriate in the English curriculum of a Southeast Asian country that was last involved in a war six years ago in 2016. This study found that although the texts addressed relevant themes of family relationships, cross-cultural interactions, and the formulation of ethnic and cultural identity hierarchies, they did not bring the Malaysian perspective into the classroom, nor did they promote inter-ethnic engagement. A contributing factor might be the fact that the selected texts are all either modified or taken directly from books and written material from other countries.

Literature that is unable to bring in a country's own perspective into the classroom is not uncommon in South Africa, especially in the setwork selection for English language learners because Western texts are privileged over local texts and learners are taught texts that do not include their culture to engage them in the process of teaching and learning, and to serve as a medium for learners to maintain their local and national identities.

In a study by Mohamed et al. (2021) on Malaysian university students' attitudes and perceptions towards cultural elements in literary texts, students were given different questionnaires based on three objectives of the study and one of the objectives was to analyse the significant relationship between attitudes and perceptions of the students towards culturally loaded literary texts in assisting English language learning. Most participants selected "strongly agree" when asked if they could learn language better when they are able to relate to topics and themes of the literary texts to their cultural backgrounds. The findings of this study revealed that students had positive attitudes towards culturally loaded texts as they enabled them to understand other people and their cultures or backgrounds better and be more accepting and appreciative of them but, most

importantly (Mohamed et al. 2021), it proved that when learners understand what they are reading, they enjoy it and do not feel excluded when their cultural backgrounds are considered by selectors of literary texts. According to Mohamed et al. (2021), literature and culture share properties such as values, behaviours, and language patterns and this enables learners to make relations in literary texts from their cultural backgrounds.

The findings of Mohamed's study, mentioned in the above paragraph revealed that based on a focus on the short stories' characterisation, setting, plot and theme, African values were constantly present in the stories and were presented on different components of the stories and thus selectors selected texts that centralised African values. However, the study recommended that teachers and learners need to be actively conscious of the existence of these Afrocentric values and their purposes in literature analyses and the South African classroom (Dlamini 2018). This recommendation made by Dlamini (2018) could be seen as an indication that African values could be present in prescribed literature and missed by both teachers and learners if they are not aware of them or actively searching for them.

The South African curriculum since 1994 has been criticised for different reasons and the selection of setwork is one of the reasons for its critique. This last study is a research report which is a critique of the 2009-2011 English setwork selection by Silverthorne (2011) and it is aimed at exploring whether the selection shows transformation in line with the aims of the National School Curriculum or it has stuck to the traditional literature that was selected in previous years. To do this, Silverthorne (2011) analyses the National Curriculum Statement in terms of the principles and outcomes which it intends to be actualised in the study of English and selects those that seem applicable to literature studies. In this study there is also a comparison between the 2009-2011 prescribed literature selection and setworks set from 1942 to 2008. This comparison establishes whether the new syllabus has departed from old syllabus designs, whether it acknowledges the new target group of pupils in multiracial, English Home Language classrooms by offering a revised, wider, and more inclusive selection of novels, dramas, poems, and other genres such as short stories, or whether it remains traditionally Anglocentric in conception (Silverthorne 2011).

The conclusions reached are that although the networks conform to the letter of the requirements set down in the NCS, the underlying spirit of transformation is not realised (Silverthorne 2011). The syllabus is not reoriented, and the curriculum remains Eurocentric core curriculum that does not reflect the interests and identities of the wide range of learners studying English Language in a South African context (Silverthorne 2011).

Silverthorne (2011) recommends that the choice of novels should be wide and should include writers from other parts of the world. She also recommends that text selectors be tasked with the responsibility of including South African writers so that the selected networks accommodate contextually and content-wise the life-worlds of so many of South African pupils (Silverthorne 2011). Other recommendations were that a modern novel from the later 20th century had to be on the list, as should books by writers of both sexes and different racial groups.

It has been years since these recommendations and there has been not much change in the selected network for English Language learners, especially in terms of selecting books by writers from different race groups and including South African writers. The current selected network does not accommodate, contextually and content-wise, the life-worlds so most South African learners.

To sum up this review, South African network selectors have a lot of work to do to ensure that the prescribed literature recognises learners, their age, personal experiences, cultural backgrounds. South Africa's English Language curriculum cannot and will not move towards transformation and learners and teachers will continue to have difficulties teaching and learning literature until it not only promotes local knowledge, but local knowledge is at the core of our curriculum.

The field of scholarly research in African adolescent literature is not extensive; there is a gap for more research on the teaching of adolescent literature and how it would benefit learners even though learners are already reading adolescent literature that has been suggested by friends or family members to them outside school (Piotrowski et al. 2013). This paper recommends further research on Afrocentrism in education and the teaching of Adolescent Literature in South African contexts.

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