

# Exploring the Relationship between Knowledge and Power in Transformative Education: A Case Study of African Contexts

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## Abstract

The accelerating pace of global change, digital innovation, and ecological crisis has prompted growing demands for a rethinking of education's foundational purposes. This paper explores the complex relationship between knowledge and power in the context of transformative education, emphasizing how power relations shape what counts as legitimate knowledge, whose voices are included, and how educational institutions contribute to (or resist) social transformation. Drawing on critical pedagogy, post-structuralist theory, and decolonial epistemologies, this analysis critiques the traditional university model grounded in linear knowledge transfer and disciplinary silos. It advocates for a reflexive paradigm that repositions educators as co-creators of knowledge, working collaboratively across institutional, disciplinary, and social boundaries. The aim is to critically examine

how power is exercised and negotiated within contemporary educational systems, and to explore pathways for constructing more inclusive and future-oriented models of knowledge. Special attention is given to how digital transformation can be used not merely as tools of efficiency, but as instruments for redistributing epistemic authority and cultivating civic agency. Grounded in examples from African higher education systems, this analysis foregrounds tensions between innovation and inequality, and between institutional inertia and foresight. This paper invites a broader conversation about the ethical, political, and pedagogical responsibilities of education in the 21st century and contributes to the evolving discourse on transformative education by offering a vision rooted in epistemic justice, participatory knowledge-making, and socially responsive learning ecosystems.

**Keywords:** transformative education; critical pedagogy; epistemic justice; reflexivity; sustainable development

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## Introduction

The twenty-first century presents a critical moment for reimagining the role of education in advancing global well-being, democratic participation, and sustainable development. As global development frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize<sup>1</sup>, the transformation of educational systems is foundational to meeting the demands of a more just and sustainable world. It is not simply a quantitative objective of access or literacy, but a qualitative call for a new paradigm that redefines how knowledge is produced, shared, and governed. Similarly, the African Union's Agenda 2063 articulates a vision of an integrated and prosperous Africa, underpinned by "an education and skills revolution" that is not only technologically driven but ethically conscious and contextually grounded (African Union, 2015). These agendas reflect a growing consensus that current education systems must be fundamentally restructured, not merely updated, to respond to accelerating social, environmental, and technological disruptions.

At the core of this global imperative lies a central and often underexplored tension: education functions simultaneously as a site of empowerment and as an instrument of systemic exclusion. While education holds the promise of individual and collective transformation, it has also historically reproduced deep hierarchies in knowledge and power. From colonial curricula to standardized testing regimes, many educational systems around the world, including those in Africa, have mirrored and reinforced broader structural inequalities. Such systems often privilege Eurocentric epistemologies while marginalizing local, indigenous, and experiential forms of knowledge. The result is an epistemic hierarchy that validates some ways of knowing while rendering others invisible, thereby entrenching unequal power relations under the guise of neutrality and scientific objectivity (Santos, 2014).

Nowhere is this tension more visible and more urgent than in the African context. African nations inherited formal education systems built largely on colonial foundations, where schooling was designed to discipline, assimilate, and administratively manage local populations rather than to cultivate democratic agency or critical consciousness (Mamdani, 1996). Post-independence reforms have sought to Africanize curricula, expand access, and democratize learning spaces, but these efforts often remain constrained by institutional inertia, global funding dependencies, and a continued reliance on imported knowledge models. At the same time, Africa has emerged as a site of vibrant educational experimentation. Across the continent, grassroots movements, civil society actors, and forward-looking universities have begun to challenge dominant paradigms by reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems, embracing digital innovation, and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. This dual reality of epistemic dislocation and emerging transformation makes Africa an instructive focus for analyzing how knowledge and power shape education in the twenty-first century.

This paper takes up the challenge of interrogating the power dynamics embedded in contemporary educational systems, with a focus on how transformative education can address epistemic injustice in African contexts. Rather than treating education as a neutral mechanism for knowledge transfer, it asks: Who decides what knowledge is worth knowing? Whose voices are included or excluded in curricula and pedagogical practices? How can universities and educators work reflexively to dismantle epistemic hierarchies while remaining responsive to global imperatives such as sustainable development? In addressing these questions, this paper adopts a critical humanistic lens, grounded in theoretical insights from (Foucault, 1980; Freire, 1970; Mignolo, 2011), and other scholars of critical pedagogy and decolonial thought. It draws on Africa-based examples to illustrate how education can be reimagined not only as a site of learning but also as a space for democratic engagement, cultural reclamation, and anticipatory governance.

By engaging with these themes, this paper aims to contribute to ongoing global debates on transformative education, particularly as they intersect with the politics of knowledge production, digital transformation, and social inclusion. It seeks to offer a subtle understanding of how educational institutions, technologies, and actors can either perpetuate epistemic dominance or serve as agents of epistemic justice and democratic futures.

## Knowledge, Power, and the Foundations of Educational Authority

At the heart of any educational system lies a set of assumptions about what knowledge matters, who is authorized to produce it, and how it should be transmitted. These assumptions are rarely neutral or purely intellectual; they are shaped by political, cultural, and historical forces that structure access to power. Michel Foucault's theory of knowledge and power provides a foundational lens for understanding this dynamic. He argues that knowledge is not independent of power but inextricably linked to it. This means that what societies accept as "truth" is constructed through mechanisms of control and institutional authority (Foucault, 1980). Education, as both a social institution and a space of intellectual formation, is deeply implicated in this process. It does not simply disseminate facts; it legitimizes certain worldviews while marginalizing others, often reproducing the very hierarchies it claims to challenge.

In African contexts, the entanglement of knowledge and power takes on particular urgency due to the enduring legacy of colonialism. The formal education systems introduced during colonial rule were not designed to serve African communities but to consolidate imperial governance. Missionary schools, colonial syllabi, and imported pedagogies prioritized European languages, histories, and scientific frameworks, systematically displacing African knowledge systems. This displacement was not accidental, rather, it was a core mechanism of colonial domination. As Ngũgĩ wa

<sup>1</sup> Goal 4 of the SDGs calling for "inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all". <http://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>, accessed 19.11.2025.

Thiong'o insightfully observes, "The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized" (Thiong'o, 1986). Language was not only a medium of instruction but a political tool that defined what could be known and by whom.

The result of this history is a deeply entrenched epistemic hierarchy that continues to shape African education today. Even decades after independence, African universities often remain tethered to colonial logics in their curricula, research agendas, and institutional structures. Western theories dominate the social sciences and humanities; foreign textbooks are considered more authoritative than local texts; and academic success is measured through metrics shaped by Euro-American publishing norms. Dei (2014) explains that "African students have been made strangers to their own knowledge systems," a condition that alienates learners and reproduces intellectual dependency. This exclusion of indigenous knowledge is not merely a curriculum gap; it is an ongoing form of epistemic violence that denies African societies the right to define their own intellectual priorities.

Yet, resistance to these hierarchies is growing. Across African universities and communities, educators and scholars are engaging in what Walter Mignolo (2011) calls 'epistemic disobedience', which is a refusal to accept Western knowledge as universal and a commitment to re-centering local epistemologies. Epistemic disobedience involves rejecting the dominant epistemological frameworks that legitimize only Western thought and instead asserting the validity of African ways of knowing, reasoning, and imagining. Mignolo defines this act as "delinking from the illusion of the zero point epistemology," which falsely claims neutrality while obscuring its own colonial roots. In practice, this can take many forms: revising university syllabi to include African philosophers and theorists, teaching in local languages, or integrating community-based knowledge into formal learning environments.

However, these efforts often face structural resistance. Donor-driven reforms, accreditation standards, and the global prestige economy in academia tend to privilege Western models of excellence. As a result, African scholars advocating for indigenous epistemologies may find themselves marginalized within their own institutions or forced to translate their ideas into frameworks that conform to external expectations. The continued reliance on Eurocentric validation mechanisms, such as international rankings, citation indices, and journal gatekeeping, reinforces the very power asymmetries that decolonial movements seek to dismantle.

Understanding the foundations of educational authority in Africa, therefore, requires more than a critique of colonial legacies. It demands a deeper inquiry into how these legacies persist in contemporary practices and how alternative knowledge systems can be legitimized without being absorbed or neutralized by dominant epistemologies. Education must be recognized not just as a space for knowledge transmission but as a site of struggle, that is, a terrain where competing visions of the world, identity, and justice are constantly negotiated. As such, the process of reclaiming African knowledge traditions must be linked to broader strug-

gles for cultural sovereignty, institutional autonomy, and social transformation.

The challenge going forward is not only to critique the dominance of Western knowledge in African education but also to create the conditions under which multiple epistemologies can coexist, interact, and shape educational futures. This requires institutional reflexivity, policy support, and intellectual courage to rethink what it means to educate in a world marked by plurality, inequality, and rapid change. The next section explores the role of reflexivity in this transformation, examining how African universities are beginning to reconceptualize their role in society and engage critically with their own knowledge practices.

## Reflexivity and the Crisis of Educational Legitimacy in African Universities

In recent decades, African higher education has faced a deepening crisis of relevance, which is a growing gap between what universities teach and what societies need. Although African universities have expanded in enrolment, their curricula and institutional priorities often fail to reflect the lived realities, developmental needs, or epistemological foundations of the communities they serve. This disconnect has eroded public trust in higher education's ability to contribute meaningfully to national development or social justice. In many cases, university graduates are unable to apply their knowledge to local contexts, not due to a lack of intelligence or effort, but because the knowledge systems they are trained in remain abstracted from their immediate social environments. As Mkandawire (2005) lamented, "Africa's universities are in Africa, but they are not always of Africa". This reflects not just institutional dysfunction but an epistemic condition rooted in the lingering influence of colonial academic models.

Central to this crisis is the persistence of the 'detached academic' ideal, which is an epistemological stance inherited from Western liberal education traditions that positions scholars as neutral observers, producing knowledge for its own sake. In many African institutions, academic success is still measured by conformity to this detached ideal: individualistic research, abstract theorization, and publishing in international journals that often have little concern for local contexts. While objectivity remains an important scientific value, the uncritical embrace of detachment has sidelined questions of relevance, social responsibility, and ethical engagement. It has also created a hierarchy between theory and practice, privileging conceptual knowledge while devaluing experiential, community-based, or applied learning.

Against this background, several African intellectuals have called for a reflexive and socially engaged model of scholarship that challenges the idea of neutrality and insists on the university's responsibility to society. One of the most influential voices in this discourse is Mahmood Mamdani, who has persistently criticized the colonial roots of African universities and the failure of post-independence reforms to decolonize the production of knowledge. He argues that African universities must confront their embeddedness in historical systems of epistemic exclusion: "The university in Africa inherited an institutional form whose intellectual

mission was premised on reproducing colonial knowledge... It remains a gatekeeper of exclusionary truths” (Mamdani, 2016). For Mamdani, the solution lies in reshaping universities into institutions that not only produce knowledge but interrogate the conditions of their own authority; that is, becoming reflexive about what they teach, how they teach, and for whom.

Reflexivity, in this context, goes beyond introspection. It involves recognizing that knowledge is shaped by historical location, social position, and institutional power, and requires that universities remain open to critique, experimentation, and co-construction with the communities they serve. This implies a radical rethinking of curriculum design, research priorities, faculty roles, and student engagement. It demands moving from knowledge for the people to knowledge with the people. As Nyamnjoh argues: “To decolonize the university is not merely to include new content, but to change the terms of inclusion and the processes of knowing” (Nyamnjoh, 2012).

African communities are increasingly insisting on participatory, responsive, and emancipatory models of knowledge, ones that acknowledge local contexts, embrace indigenous epistemologies, and address pressing socio-economic and environmental challenges.

Promising models of institutional reflexivity are emerging across Africa. At the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) in Uganda, Mamdani pioneered a doctoral program that re-centres African political thought and prioritizes primary sources over imported theoretical frameworks. Rather than adopting disciplinary silos, the program emphasizes historical contextualization, critical pedagogy, and engagement with African intellectual legacies (Mamdani, 2007). Similarly, the University of Cape Town’s Curriculum Change Working Group launched campus-wide dialogues on decolonizing teaching practices and knowledge systems, resulting in faculty and student-led reforms. These institutional efforts reveal how reflexivity can be institutionalized not merely as a critique, but as an affirmative practice that reshapes academic cultures and norms.

Despite such innovations, the structural obstacles to reflexive education in Africa remain significant. Donor-driven research priorities, rigid accreditation standards, and the pressure to compete in global university rankings often limit the space for epistemic experimentation. Metrics-based evaluation systems continue to valorize international publication in English-language journals, reinforcing dependency on Euro-American epistemological validation. These constraints make it difficult for African scholars to align research with local needs without risking professional marginalization. Moreover, state policies in many countries fail to support academic freedom, participatory governance, or adequate infrastructure, further weakening the institutional autonomy needed for transformative education.

Nevertheless, student-led movements across the continent have become a powerful force for reflexivity and reform. From the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests in South Africa, to curriculum change agitations in Kenya and Nigeria, students have demanded more inclusive, accountable, and relevant education systems. These movements

have not only challenged institutional elitism but have also exposed the symbolic and structural exclusions embedded in African universities. They push for epistemic justice, language inclusivity, better governance, and a reconceptualization of education as a public good rather than a market commodity. These mobilizations reaffirm the idea that reflexivity is not only a top-down institutional reform, but a bottom-up democratic practice.

To become truly reflexive and socially embedded, African universities must reject the myth of epistemic neutrality and embrace a pluralistic vision of knowledge that is locally grounded yet globally engaged. This transformation is not merely a matter of institutional reform; it is an epistemological and ethical shift that redefines the role of the university as a public, political, and transformative actor in African societies. Universities must not only respond to societal needs but also actively shape them, co-creating futures in collaboration with students, communities, and broader publics.

### **Interdisciplinarity, Transdisciplinarity, and Epistemic Justice in African Contexts**

Contemporary African societies face development challenges that are complex, interconnected, and resistant to solutions framed within narrow disciplinary boundaries. Issues such as food insecurity, climate vulnerability, youth unemployment, public health crises, and governance failures cannot be adequately addressed through mono-disciplinary approaches. Yet many African universities continue to rely on rigid disciplinary structures inherited from colonial academic traditions, often organized around departmental silos that discourage cross-disciplinary collaboration. This fragmentation inhibits holistic thinking and limits the ability of scholars and students to engage with the real-world complexity of African development. “Most African higher education systems remain structured in disciplinary formats that are not sufficiently responsive to multi-scalar and dynamic development problems” (Luescher et al., 2021).

Interdisciplinarity offers a corrective to this rigidity by encouraging collaboration across established academic fields. It recognizes that the boundaries between economics, sociology, environmental science, political theory, and public health are artificial when dealing with deeply interwoven societal issues. In recent years, several African universities have begun to institutionalize interdisciplinary programs to foster more responsive and innovative forms of scholarship. For instance, the University of Cape Town has launched initiatives such as the Global Risk Governance Programme, which brings together law, public health, and environmental studies to address systemic vulnerabilities. Similarly, the Future Africa Institute at the University of Pretoria promotes continent-wide research collaboration on sustainability, food systems, and innovation, explicitly designed to ‘transcend disciplinary and institutional boundaries’ in pursuit of African-led solutions (Future Africa, 2020).

A comparable effort is found at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Ghana, where interdisciplinary research centres, such as the Centre for Cultural and African Studies and the Technology Consultancy Centre, have been established to promote hy-

brid forms of inquiry that draw on both scientific and local knowledge systems. These centres engage with artisans, cooperatives, and rural communities to co-develop appropriate technologies, integrating community wisdom with formal engineering and social research. This approach reflects a commitment not only to interdisciplinarity but to locally grounded innovation. Odora-Hoppers (2009) argues that Africa must break with the false dichotomy between scientific and indigenous knowledge and foster synergy through integrated knowledge systems.

However, interdisciplinarity alone does not address the deeper question of epistemic hierarchy. While it brings multiple disciplines into dialogue, it often remains confined within academic logics that continue to privilege Western theoretical frameworks and methodologies. Transdisciplinarity, by contrast, goes further by incorporating non-academic knowledge systems (community practices, indigenous worldviews, oral traditions) into the research and learning process. This approach does not merely integrate perspectives; it disrupts hierarchies of expertise by recognizing the co-production of knowledge between universities and society. As Le Grange puts it: “Transdisciplinarity provides a platform for mutual learning between science and society... It values the agency of all knowledge actors and creates spaces for knowledge that is plural and contextually grounded” (Le Grange, 2016).

African traditional knowledge systems have long embodied transdisciplinary logic. Practices such as indigenous conflict resolution, herbal medicine, agricultural techniques, and storytelling are grounded in communal, experiential knowledge that cuts across categories of science, ethics, history, and spirituality. These systems are not static remnants of the past but dynamic repositories of innovation and adaptation. For example, community-based climate forecasting in parts of East and West Africa, relying on patterns in flora, fauna, and celestial observation, has often proven more context-sensitive than externally imposed meteorological models. Yet such knowledge is rarely legitimized in formal education, which still privileges textual literacy and laboratory-based science. This marginalization reinforces what Santos (2014) calls ‘Epistemicide’, which is the silencing and erasure of entire systems of knowing.

At a continental level, initiatives such as the African Union’s Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa (STISA-2024) and Agenda 2063 provide a political framework to reorient research and education systems toward inclusive, context-sensitive knowledge ecosystems. STISA-2024 explicitly recognizes the need to “integrate indigenous knowledge into national systems of innovation” and promote science that is socially accountable. While implementation remains uneven, these frameworks signal growing institutional recognition that inter-disciplinarity and knowledge pluralism are essential for transformative education and sustainable development (Loorbach, Wittmayer, 2024).

Nevertheless, integrating indigenous and community-based knowledge into university systems is not without its risks. When not approached carefully, such inclusion may lead to bureaucratic appropriation, extractive validation,

or epistemic tokenism, where traditional knowledge is re-contextualized merely to meet donor mandates or diversify curricula superficially. The ethical stakes are high: without genuine community partnership, the process may reinforce the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle. Bangura (2011) cautions that indigenous knowledge must not be subordinated to Western paradigms; it must be protected, respected, and allowed to speak on its own terms. Transdisciplinary learning, therefore, requires not only methodological innovation but ethical clarity and power sensitivity.

By embracing transdisciplinary and community-engaged education, African institutions are beginning to reconfigure educational practices to include neglected epistemologies and perspectives. Programs that link students with rural cooperatives, urban informal sector actors, or indigenous knowledge holders not only enrich academic inquiry but foster a more just and inclusive knowledge economy. These pedagogical approaches foreground the idea that epistemic justice is not simply about adding African voices to existing canons, but about restructuring the architecture of knowledge production to allow for diverse modalities of thought and experience. Transdisciplinary learning thus becomes both a method and an ethic, one that promotes mutual respect, shared authority, and dialogical understanding.

Still, institutional challenges persist. Universities face pressures to conform to international accreditation standards, many of which devalue community-based research or non-traditional outputs. Faculty workloads, disciplinary politics, and limited funding for experimental programs also inhibit wider adoption of transdisciplinary models. Nevertheless, the shift toward inclusive knowledge practices is gaining momentum. It reflects a growing recognition that no sustainable development can occur without epistemic pluralism, and that African futures require not only new technologies or funding, but a radical redistribution of epistemic power.

## Digital Transformation and the Politics of Educational Technology in Africa

Digital transformation has become a defining feature of global education reform, with universities across Africa increasingly integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI), Educational Technologies (EdTech), learning analytics, and virtual classrooms into teaching and research. Proponents argue that digital innovations offer new possibilities for personalized learning, expanded access, and improved efficiency. Across the continent, mobile-based learning platforms, online degree programs, and AI-enhanced tutoring systems are rapidly being introduced as part of national and institutional reform agendas. These shifts are often framed as inevitable and progressive, in line with global calls for digital inclusion and the development goals enshrined in Agenda 2063 and SDG 4. However, the deployment of these technologies is shaped by deep politics of access, design, and control, raising urgent questions about who benefits, who decides, and what knowledge gets amplified or silenced.

While African universities are adopting digital tools, vast disparities in infrastructure, digital literacy, and affordability persist. In many rural areas, students lack access to stable internet connections, devices, or even electricity, limiting the

feasibility of technology-driven pedagogy. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and widened these inequalities, as elite institutions quickly moved to online learning while many public universities struggled to provide even basic digital support. As Prinsloo observes: “Digital inclusion in Africa cannot be assumed merely by the provision of devices; it is a relational, contextual, and political issue shaped by unequal power relations” (Prinsloo, 2020).

Even where digital platforms are accessible, language barriers, cultural mismatches, and unfamiliar pedagogies often alienate learners, especially when content is imported wholesale from the Global North without adaptation.

Moreover, the growing use of algorithmic systems and AI in education introduces new layers of exclusion and bias. Learning analytics systems used to track student engagement or predict dropout risk often operate on data models developed outside African contexts, encoding assumptions that do not reflect local learning patterns or social conditions. This creates a risk of algorithmic bias, where students are mischaracterized, penalized, or invisibilized by systems that claim objectivity. For instance, predictive models that prioritize metrics such as online activity time or English-language proficiency may undervalue alternative learning styles or linguistic diversity. Noble (2018) warns that Algorithms are not neutral; they reflect the interests and ideologies of those who create them. This becomes particularly concerning in Africa, where most AI systems fail to accommodate indigenous languages and cultural norms. A study by Bird (2020) found that less than 0.1% of publicly available NLP (natural language processing) datasets globally represent African languages, rendering African learners algorithmically invisible in global EdTech systems.

Yet, African students and educators have not been passive recipients of technological change. Across multiple contexts, they have adapted and re-appropriated digital tools in ways that reflect local agency and innovation. In Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya, students frequently organize study groups via WhatsApp and Telegram, creating informal learning networks that substitute for formal infrastructure. Lecturers at the University of Lagos and the University of Ghana have adopted audio-based micro-lectures disseminated through SMS or low-data platforms to reach underserved students. These practices demonstrate what Emejulu and McGregor (2019) describe as ‘insurgent digital pedagogy’, which are locally rooted strategies that resist standardization and prioritize community-based engagement.

Alongside these bottom-up practices, concerns around data sovereignty and digital extractivism have intensified. Many EdTech platforms operating in Africa collect and monetize user data, often without meaningful consent or regulatory oversight. This dynamic reflects a broader trend of data colonialism, in which African learners become sources of raw data for corporate algorithm development and behavioral profiling. As Couldry and Mejias argue: “Data colonialism extends the historical relationship of imperial extraction into the digital realm, where human life is appropriated for profit under the guise of connectivity” (Couldry, Mejias, 2019).

Without clear data protection frameworks or institutional bargaining power, African universities risk becoming test-

ing grounds for extractive digital experiments, further entrenching Global North–South asymmetries.

Despite these risks, promising innovations continue to emerge. Mobile-based learning systems built on M-PESA, Kenya’s mobile money platform, have enabled rural learners to access audio lessons, receive assignments, and even pay for school services without needing a smartphone. Open-access platforms such as the African Virtual University, and localized MOOCs offered by institutions like Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria, provide culturally relevant content that incorporates African languages, histories, and socio-economic contexts. These initiatives challenge the techno-determinist assumption that innovation must follow a linear trajectory modeled after Northern templates. Instead, they demonstrate that digital transformation can be indigenized, participatory, and socially embedded.

Looking ahead, African universities have an opportunity to envision digital futures rooted in foresight, justice, and contextual relevance. This means investing not just in infrastructure, but in institutional imagination, that is, supporting locally led AI research, community-centered EdTech startups, and multilingual platform development. Continental bodies such as the African Union and regional academic networks should prioritize digital sovereignty and open-source governance, ensuring that African universities set their own terms of technological engagement. As Mutula argues: “Digital transformation in Africa must be anticipatory and self-determined; guided by local priorities, informed by indigenous epistemologies, and owned by the communities it serves” (Mutula, 2021).

A truly transformative digital education system in Africa will not be imported; it will be co-designed by those who live its consequences.

## **Navigating Power in Practice: Pedagogical and Institutional Strategies for Africa**

Addressing the asymmetries of knowledge and power in African education requires not only critical diagnosis but practical, context-driven strategies for institutional and pedagogical transformation. While calls for decolonization and epistemic justice are gaining traction, implementation remains fragmented and often symbolic. Moving from critique to construction necessitates a multi-level approach that brings together curriculum reform, governance innovation, foresight thinking, and grassroots participation. If African education is to catalyze inclusive development rather than replicate global inequalities, its transformation must be both ethically grounded and strategically foresighted.

One of the most urgent interventions is the decolonization of curricula across all levels of education. This goes beyond substituting Western texts with African ones. It requires a reconceptualization of how knowledge is organized, valued, and taught, that is, centering indigenous epistemologies, African intellectual traditions, oral histories, and community-based knowledge in both content and method. Institutions such as the University of South Africa (UNISA) and Makerere University have piloted curriculum audits that assess the ideological underpinnings of course content and pedagogical practice. Nyamnjoh (2016) insists that decoloniza-

tion must involve not just the curriculum but the habitus of thinking that reproduces colonial epistemic hierarchies. This kind of curricular transformation must be supported by investments in faculty training, multilingual teaching resources, and participatory knowledge production frameworks.

Beyond curricular change, African education systems must embrace co-designed learning models that bring universities into closer collaboration with local communities, civil society groups, and non-state actors. In many regions, there is a wealth of experiential, indigenous, and applied knowledge that remains outside formal academic structures. Co-design involves moving from consultation to partnership, whereby communities are not just sources of data or passive recipients of knowledge, but active collaborators in shaping curricula, research agendas, and teaching formats. The Community-Based Education, Research and Service (COBERS) program in Uganda, for instance, places students in rural areas for collaborative problem-solving with local stakeholders. This model of reciprocal learning reflects a shift from transactional to transformative educational relationships.

Foresight tools can serve as catalysts for long-term reform, providing structured methods to navigate uncertainty and imagine alternative futures for African education (UNESCO, 2021). Techniques such as scenario planning, visioning, and backcasting allow educators and policymakers to anticipate social, technological, and environmental shifts while anchoring reform in local values and aspirations. For example, the African Institute for Futures Studies (AIFS) has trained education ministries in Namibia and Rwanda to use foresight methodologies for rethinking curriculum priorities in light of automation, climate change, and youth migration trends. Miller (2018) notes that foresight is not about prediction; it is about capacity-building for systemic transformation based on preferred futures. In African contexts, foresight-driven planning can democratize decision-making and ensure that educational reforms are both responsive and inclusive.

These institutional strategies can be strengthened by aligning them with continental education frameworks, such as the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25). CESA prioritizes capacity-building in science, technology, indigenous knowledge systems, and equity-based reforms. Embedding university-level reforms within such regional frameworks allows for scaling local innovations while harmonizing them with long-term development goals. Similarly, foresight work by bodies like the South African Node of the Millennium Project and the Next Einstein Forum show how futures thinking can inform STEM and social science education at both policy and institutional levels (African Union, 2016).

However, transformation is not without resistance. In many African countries, elite academic institutions, accreditation bodies, and even international donors often reproduce conservative pedagogical models that valorize Eurocentric benchmarks of academic excellence. These actors sometimes view decolonial or transdisciplinary reforms as a threat to institutional prestige or market competitiveness. Moreover,

bureaucratic inertia, risk aversion, and dependency on external rankings continue to undermine innovation. Naidoo (2022) argues that higher education in Africa risks becoming a managerialist project, more concerned with metrics than meaning.

To overcome this resistance, ethical leadership must accompany the structural and pedagogical reforms as well as collective pressure from students, faculty alliances, and civil society coalitions. Leadership in transformative education involves more than bureaucratic efficiency; it demands a commitment to justice, participation, and epistemic humility. African university leaders, curriculum planners, and education ministers must move beyond managerialist models and cultivate capacities for ethical deliberation, participatory governance, and sustained engagement with societal challenges. The work of Nigerian scholar Adebayo Olukoshi has emphasized the need for leadership that is "morally courageous, intellectually independent, and rooted in the public purpose of education" (Olukoshi, 2017). Building such leadership requires policy environments that reward innovation, protect academic freedom, and provide institutional autonomy while fostering accountability.

Finally, any meaningful transformation of African education must recognize the agency of students, grassroots movements, and civil society. From the Fees Must Fall protests in South Africa to ongoing language-rights campaigns in Cameroon and Kenya, students have persistently challenged exclusionary knowledge systems and called for more just and relevant educational practices. Civil society organizations, especially those working on gender, rural access, and indigenous rights, have long served as epistemic intermediaries, translating lived experience into policy discourse and pedagogical content. Including these actors in formal educational governance structures (curriculum councils, university senates, accreditation boards) can help break the insulation of academia and inject broader social accountability into reform processes.

In navigating the politics of knowledge and transformation, African education must not seek a return to some essentialized indigenous past, nor replicate imported models of innovation. Instead, it must craft hybrid, grounded, and forward-looking pathways that allow for continuous negotiation between the local and the global, the traditional and the experimental, the institutional and the communal. As Mbembe argues: "The university of the future must be a pluriversal space; open to all knowledges, sensitive to historical wounds, and committed to planetary futures" (Mbembe, 2016).

Building such a university begins not with abstract policy but with deliberate pedagogical and institutional choices that center justice, inclusion, and African agency.

## Conclusion

The challenges facing education in Africa today are not merely technical or institutional; they are deeply epistemological and political. This paper has shown that transformative education must engage the twin problem of knowledge and power if it is to be relevant, just, and sustainable. Across

the continent, the legacies of colonial knowledge systems continue to shape curricula, pedagogies, and institutional structures in ways that exclude alternative epistemologies and marginalize learners. At the same time, emerging digital technologies, interdisciplinary learning models, and grassroots educational innovations offer new possibilities for reimagining education as a force for inclusive development and social emancipation.

Through a critical engagement with theorists such as (Foucault, 1980; Freire, 1970; Mignolo, 2011; Mbembe, 2016) this paper has traced how knowledge validation in African institutions has often mirrored global hierarchies of power. The uptake of reflexivity, interdisciplinarity, and foresight in some African universities reveals that a shift is underway, one that prioritizes relevance over abstraction, community co-creation over academic detachment, and ethical leadership over bureaucratic conformity. At its core, this shift challenges the myth of the neutral university and calls for a model of education that is not only locally grounded but globally conscious.

As African institutions respond to crises of legitimacy and inequality, reflexivity must become both a scholarly and institutional ethic. Educators, policymakers, and civil society actors must ask not just what students should know, but whose knowledge is valued, how it is produced, and to what ends it serves. This necessitates more robust research into

the mechanisms of epistemic injustice, the politics of digital transformation, and the role of foresight in long-term educational planning. Such research must center African voices, experiences, and aspirations, not as data points, but as drivers of theoretical and institutional renewal.

There is global significance in the innovations unfolding across African education. From mobile learning platforms rooted in community networks to indigenous knowledge systems now entering the academy, Africa is not merely catching up; it is reconfiguring what meaningful education can look like in the 21st century. These efforts challenge dominant paradigms, offering lessons in equity, adaptability, and imagination that are urgently needed in a rapidly changing world. As universities across the globe grapple with their roles in uncertain futures, African-led models of transformation offer critical insights into how knowledge can be both emancipatory and socially embedded.

In reaffirming the imperative of epistemic justice and power-awareness in educational reform, this paper underscores that transformative education is not a destination but a political and ethical process. It requires collective struggle, strategic foresight, and an unrelenting commitment to inclusion. Only by confronting the deep entanglements of knowledge and power can African education systems become engines of just futures, which will be locally anchored, continentally coherent, and globally resonant.

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