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# SARE

**Southern African Review of Education**

Editor: Charl Wolhuter

**A Review of Comparative Education,  
History of Education and Educational  
Development**



# SACHES

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THE SOUTHERN  
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# SARE

Southern African Review of Education

A journal of comparative education, history of education  
and educational development

Volume 30, Issue 2, December 2025

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## Editorial notes

Charl Wolhuter

This is the second 2025 issue of the *Southern African Review of Education*. This issue contains eight articles. At present, the most compelling change impacting on higher education is that of generative artificial intelligence or AI. This includes even the operation of journals and during recent weeks, the *Southern African Review of Education* has had to put in place a protocol regarding AI (this protocol is now part of the guidelines for submission, to be found at the back of this issue). With still many more questions than answers as to how to respond to AI, in the first article in this issue, Aslam Fataar reflects on Gen AI and academe.

Despite claims that the present world is a post-religious world, religion persists as an important factor in the lives of individuals and of society, albeit in being present in new forms. The second article deals with the intersection between education and religion. South Africa is currently on the cusp of making one year pre-primary school part of the compulsory school band. Inevitably, and justifiably so, early childhood education is set to rise on the education research agenda in South Africa. Thus, in the third article, Deidre Geduld and Ezekiel Majola focus on transforming early childhood education through community gardens, by means of a participatory action learning approach.

Language remains a very contentious issue in South African education. In the fourth article, Winile Thusi and Labby Ramrathan turn the spotlight on why student teachers choose isiZulu as first additional language. And, an unresolved issue in South African education is that of learner discipline, which is aggravated by persistent occurrences of corporal punishment. In the fifth article, Essau Sefolo, Pierre du Plessis, and Bernardus Grobler investigate a sample of teachers' perceptions of corporal punishment. Then, as we all wonder as to the long-term effects of COVID-19-induced changes to education, Najwa Norodien-Fataar, in the sixth article, focuses on pedagogical change in the post-COVID university.

Leadership is a young but rising field of scholarship within the family of fields of education scholarship. In the seventh article, Farhana Amod Kajee explores women's leadership practices in a school leadership preparation programme at a South African university. If leadership has been rising in the scholarly discourse in recent years, the public discourse has seen the discourse on the decolonisation of education rising to prominence. In the final article in the issue, Hannes van der Walt writes about a pedagogical strategy towards bringing an end to coloniality in the Global South.

I wish to discuss two further issues pertaining to the journal in this editorial, namely, the role of reviewers and patterns of authorship. On the first, a vital (if often not visible and not appreciated) part of the operation of any scholarly journal, including the *Southern African Review of Education*, is that of peer reviewers. Any journal editor will testify that the most demanding part of the work

of an editor is to secure enough, high quality peer review reports for submissions. This is one part of scholarly work that cannot, as per standard good practice, be contracted out to AI (as is also explained in the AI policy, which is published under Guidelines for Submission at the back of this issue). It is understandable that doing peer review work is becoming ever more challenging in view of the rising work pressure that members of the academic profession find themselves. But at the same time, peer review work is part of academic citizenship and an indispensable part of the entire academic project. I as editor often come face to face with scholars refusing to review manuscripts. Doing so is unethical behaviour in as far as you benefit from the very same process. Then, secondly, I deal with reviewers who do the reviewing in a hurried, perfunctory way or do it half-heartedly or half-measuredly. That likewise, in the final instance, undermines the academic standing of the journal. Finally, many reviewers do reviewing thoroughly and seriously, and I wish to make use of this editorial to sincerely thank these corps of colleagues. Without you, this journal and this issue would not have been possible.

SACHES (of which I was one of the founding members in 1991) and therefore this journal as the publication forum of SACHES, was formed with one of the main rationales being to counter Northern hegemony in the field of comparative and international education. In fact, a major part of my current work is on the elan of ensuring that the Global South comes to its right in the field (see Wolhuter, 2024). It has often been said that, within the context of Africa, Southern Africa (in particular, South Africa) is a case of a second-order hegemonic node (i.e., a meso-scale version of Northern hegemony). One aspect of Northern hegemony in academe is patterns of authorship. While not for one moment denigrating the authors of articles in this issue—to whom I am extremely grateful for their high quality manuscripts—I have made some efforts to draw authors from parts of the SADC region outside South Africa. I feel a trifle uncomfortable that I was not successful in getting even one such article to the point of being dispatched for publishing (one submission got through the initial round of peer reviewing but with major revisions required, which the author will only attend to in time for a next edition of the journal). Given that I share the sentiment expressed by SACHES founding President, Professor Harold Herman when he talked at the founding of SACHES of his “burning desire to connect to scholars to the north of us,” I intend to do a thorough analysis of, and reflection on, authorship publication patterns in the *Southern Africa Review of Education* in the next issue of the journal and also, to put the theme up for discussion at the next SACHES conference.

## Reference

Wolhuter, C. C. (2024). *The Global South and comparative and international education: A leitmotif*. AOSIS.

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# Reclaiming the university's epistemic mission: Pedagogy, justice, and Gen AI

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## Abstract

This conceptual article explores how generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) is reshaping knowledge practices in higher education, and proposes a pedagogy centred on justice as a transformative response. Such a pedagogy revitalises the university's public purpose by recognising students as epistemic agents and supporting their progression toward deeper conceptual understanding. The core idea is *epistemic ascent*, the process by which students are guided from lived experience to disciplinary knowledge through structured, dialogical, and inclusive engagement. The article offers a pedagogical framework for integrating Gen AI into learning environments that emphasises ethical reasoning, interpretive judgment, and epistemic justice. It discusses three key dimensions. First, it identifies the epistemic disruptions caused by Gen AI in massified, marketised, and performance-driven university systems, particularly within the context of inequality and decolonisation in South Africa. Second, it advocates for design-based pedagogy and assessment methods that recognise students as creators of knowledge, fostering conceptual depth, ethical responsibility, and justice-oriented learning. Third, it explores the conditions necessary for institutional change, including strengthening the teaching core, enhancing pedagogical design capacity, and shifting university cultures towards justice, equity, and epistemic responsibility. The article concludes that reasserting the university's epistemic mission requires aligning pedagogy, assessment, and institutional priorities with justice, ensuring that universities remain critical sites of learning that prepare students to navigate and influence the complexities of Gen AI-mediated futures.

**Keywords:** epistemic ascent, generative artificial intelligence, epistemic depth, critical inquiry, pedagogical justice, design-based pedagogy and assessment, institutional transformation, higher education public purpose

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Since the advent of democracy, South African higher education has made notable progress. More students are now entering universities, research output has increased, and transformation has become institutionalised, yet the sector also faces systemic pressures that have intensified workloads and heightened expectations for compliance and performance (Luescher et al., 2023). These conditions restrict opportunities to develop thoughtful and innovative pedagogies that align with student learning and social responsiveness. At the same time, the rise of generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) has sharpened these tensions, with universities often adopting surveillance-driven, compliance-heavy responses that further erode opportunities for transformative teaching (Kramm & McKenna, 2023; Selwyn, 2024).

Gen AI's ability to produce seemingly credible writing challenges traditional approaches to teaching (Cope et al., 2025b). It challenges the reproduction-based, input–output models of teaching that have long dominated higher education. Summative testing and rote recall, staples of knowledge reproduction, do not offer a supportable foundation for assessing learning. In this moment, the university faces an urgent question: “How do we reclaim the classroom as a space of meaning, integrity, and rigorous epistemic insight?”

This question calls for a new approach to dialogical, conceptually rich, and relational pedagogy. Such pedagogy would move students beyond reproducing knowledge towards engagement, reshaping, and application in diverse contexts. It would also reframe assessment as an integral part of learning, providing opportunities for feedback, reflection, and growth. While this vision is not readily achievable within the current constraints of academic life, where knowledge reproduction structures are deeply rooted, it still offers a clear direction for those wanting to make classrooms more responsive to the needs of contemporary society. As Biesta (2010) argued, measurement cultures constrain pedagogy, underscoring the need for responsive alternatives. Such a vision understands learning as a developmental process sustained by dialogue, scaffolded tasks, and multimodal approaches. Students draw on their lived experiences while engaging critically with the world. These are not abstract ideals, but the essential capacities students need to navigate a world marked by ecological volatility, technological acceleration, and social fragmentation.

Universities today are shaped by techno-rationalism, with accountability metrics and rankings leaving little space for dialogue, reflection, or the cultivation of ethics (Luescher et al., 2023; Motala et al., 2023). A recent review, for example, showed how reforms often prioritised procedural compliance (Luescher et al., 2023). Reanimating the classroom as a site of insight and inquiry, therefore, requires courage, enabling the university to reclaim its epistemic and social purpose and to serve the public good (Marginson, 2011).

Three decades into democracy, South African universities remain pulled by multiple expectations: redressing historical inequalities, expanding access, adapting to global knowledge economies, and competing within performance-driven frameworks. While there has been progress in inclusion, research output, and institutional reform, these gains are uneven and often conceal deeper epistemic challenges (Soudien, 2023). As Soudien (2023, p. 115) showed, universities' change

strategies are often rhetorically transformative but substantively conservative—embedding them in performance regimes that limit genuine transformation. These systemic pressures highlight the structural constraints on universities and also the deeper epistemic stakes: how knowledge is valued, organised, and taught in classrooms.

Universities also operate under global and national pressures that shape what is taught, how it is valued, and whose knowledge is considered credible. As Bacevic (2019) showed, universities are increasingly shaped by shifting state policies, global markets, and transnational governance regimes, all of which determine what counts as valuable knowledge and whose perspectives are legitimised. These pressures can turn the promise of transformation into a mere procedure rather than a genuine substance. Curriculum renewal risks emphasising structure over meaning, and assessment can slide into compliance rather than growth. The challenge, then, is not merely institutional but pedagogical. It is within classrooms that the contradictions of massification, compliance, and epistemic transformation are most sharply felt. At the same time, many students enter university carrying the hopes of their families and communities. For them, higher education is not only a credential but a lifeline to recognition and dignity. Universities must therefore provide more than qualifications; they must create learning that connects disciplines to students' lives and futures (Fataar, 2019).

To move beyond these constraints requires rethinking pedagogy itself, with a renewed focus on epistemic depth, dialogical learning, and conceptual progression. In this context, new approaches to curriculum and pedagogy are emerging. They do not reject structure or rigour but call for deeper engagement with how learning unfolds. They recognise that students need time, support, and meaningful tasks to develop their intellectual capacities seriously. They encourage multiple modes of expression—visual, textual, oral, and digital—and place dialogue, reflection, and collaboration at the centre of the learning process.

This vision is demanding. It cannot be achieved by individual effort or short-term innovation. Transitioning from knowledge reproduction to design-oriented pedagogy requires a long-term institutional commitment including building capacity, creating space for experimentation, and recognising the intellectual labour of teaching. This path involves uncertainty and risk, but it also opens new horizons of possibility. There is thus a need for renewed pedagogical discussions that uphold core values while reimagining what classrooms can be. The tensions between economic responsiveness and transformative justice remain significant. Universities must both produce skilled graduates and nurture ethical citizenship, critical reflection, and diverse epistemologies. These goals are not opposed, but require careful alignment, guided by principle rather than pressure.

The classroom is where these tensions are most immediate. It can be reimagined as a place where students and educators co-create knowledge, question assumptions, and imagine fairer futures. Such processes develop through layered and unpredictable encounters that shape learning over time. The university's deeper mission, however, finds its public focus in these very interactions. Responses must therefore be purposeful and rooted in shared responsibility, particularly in the age

of Gen AI and institutional constraints.

## **Epistemic recognition in response to the challenge of Gen AI**

Universities must renew their commitment to advancing inclusive and resilient communities in the face of ecological breakdown and rising inequality. Central to their mission is preparing students for economic life and democratic engagement while nurturing civic and ethical capacities. In South Africa, this responsibility carries urgency because many students, especially those who are the first in their families to attend university, enter with rich everyday intellectual resources, languages, cultural knowledge, and lived experiences that hold meaning and epistemic potential (Luescher et al., 2023). Yet classrooms often fail to recognise and work with these assets. Narrow colonial legacies and compliance-driven priorities continue to shape curricula, pedagogical routines, and assessment systems. Students' epistemic presence is overlooked, positioning them as consumers rather than co-constructors of knowledge (Fataar, 2019).

The challenge of epistemic recognition is not simply about gaining formal access to institutions. It also involves creating environments where students are recognised as thinkers and active participants in the processes of knowledge engagement. Classroom practices should engage students' interpretive frameworks while introducing them to disciplinary conceptual frameworks. When such recognition is absent, students adapt without being fully acknowledged, and the classroom becomes a space of adjustment rather than epistemic growth. As Barnett (2009, p. 429) observed, "We may take a curriculum in higher education to be a pedagogic vehicle for effecting changes in human beings through particular kinds of encounter with knowledge." This is because, as that author pointed out, the very act of coming to know shapes the learner, cultivating dispositions and qualities that contribute to ethically meaningful ways of being. Barnett's insistence on the person-forming properties of coming to know resonates with the idea of epistemic recognition, underscoring that students must be acknowledged not only as recipients of knowledge but as knowers whose interpretive frameworks and voices shape the educational encounter.

This person-forming challenge is now complicated by the rise of Gen AI. Tools that can rapidly produce summaries, solve problems, and craft responses are becoming embedded in teaching and assessment. While such tools may support learning by aiding idea generation, providing iterative feedback, and improving organisational clarity, they risk undermining the deeper work of understanding. Without careful pedagogical mediation, Gen AI's ability to generate fluent responses bypasses interpretive struggle, reducing opportunities to cultivate epistemic virtues. The challenge is especially urgent for students still developing intellectual independence; chances for interpretive depth and critical thinking decrease, while algorithmically produced outputs are too easily accepted as sufficient evidence of learning. As a result, students' voices become harder to distinguish, weakening genuine engagement with knowledge.

These changes signal deeper structural shifts in how knowledge is recognised and assessed.

Educational systems are increasingly governed by a techno-rational logic that values speed, efficiency, and measurability over complexity and ethical judgment. In this context, the university as a space for inquiry faces considerable pressure, making its renewal both urgent and fragile.

At the same time, the rise of Gen AI necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of pedagogy. As standardised testing and rote memorisation lose relevance, universities must not scale back educational aspirations but instead, adopt a deeper commitment to learning that foregrounds human presence, judgment, and care. Such renewal requires pedagogical frameworks that promote epistemic recognition through dialogical and conceptually rich interactions. It depends on sustained institutional commitment to human capacities that Gen AI cannot replicate, such as ethical judgment, historical awareness, and imaginative inquiry, while acknowledging the pressures on lecturers working under heavy workloads in under-resourced and often precarious environments.

A new pedagogical approach must therefore be introduced gradually and supported systematically. Individual efforts remain crucial, but they should be complemented by institutional strategies that enable cumulative, shared innovation. This involves establishing spaces for co-design, communities of practice, and reflective routines sustained at the university's organisational core. When deliberately structured, the classroom can remain a powerful site for epistemic induction, nurturing critical insight, creative potential, and educational justice. The challenge is not to replace older systems overnight, but to move steadily towards an ethical vision of teaching and learning that meets the needs of our time. This is the task and the invitation for universities that want to remain humanising institutions in the age of Gen AI.

### **Epistemic ascent in the age of Gen AI: Teaching for depth and plurality**

In today's educational environment, university classrooms must remain spaces for intellectual growth. Pedagogy should support students in moving from lived knowledge to deeper conceptual understanding. This process, known as epistemic ascent (Hordern, 2016, 2018), involves guiding students beyond their everyday experiences into engagement with disciplinary logics. Through interpretation, synthesis, and abstraction, students connect personal knowledge with the structured conceptual frameworks of a field. As Hordern explained, epistemic ascent requires curricula that maintain disciplinary coherence while also accommodating the plurality of knowledge found in applied and professional contexts. Such an approach promotes depth, enabling students to critically evaluate knowledge rather than remain passive consumers. It also foregrounds students' identities and experiences, recognising these as foundations for learning. By working with academic frameworks, conceptual tools, and disciplinary languages, students begin to see how knowledge is constructed and how ideas evolve across contexts.

This development does not happen spontaneously. It depends on coherent curriculum design, sequenced knowledge progression, and deliberate pedagogy. Students require intellectual challenges that enable them to discern patterns, pose thought-provoking questions, and formulate arguments that meet disciplinary standards while addressing real-world demands. Learning thus

becomes a guided act of construction in which meaning and understanding are deepened over time.

Yet sustaining this developmental process is increasingly complex. Gen AI accelerates the move away from knowledge reproduction and traditional testing. It produces fluent outputs that mimic understanding without the intellectual effort required to build it. In systems already shaped by performance indicators, accountability regimes, and heavy workloads, Gen AI risks reinforcing education as focused on compliance rather than understanding, reducing learning to measurable outputs rather than intellectual growth. As Hordern (2016, 2018) warned, when curricula prioritise superficial skills or policy-driven outcomes over disciplinary integrity, opportunities for ascent are weakened, leaving students with only the appearance of understanding rather than its substance. These pressures are acute in massified universities where large classes, administrative demands, and job insecurity leave little space for carefully cultivated pedagogy. Precisely under such conditions, however, a clear vision of epistemic ascent is essential. Without it, the rise of Gen AI and institutional inertia threatens to erode the conditions for thoughtful, relational, and conceptually rich learning.

A constructive response lies in re-evaluating curriculum and teaching methods. Emphasising epistemic ascent, educators can chart learning pathways that move students from basic grasp to integrated understanding. Teaching should develop interpretive skills that Gen AI cannot replicate such as ethical judgment, historical insight, and relational reasoning. These emerge through sustained intellectual effort, especially in inclusive, dialogue-rich classrooms that engage complexity. Such pedagogy also embraces plural and contrapuntal traditions of knowledge (Said 1981), decentring dominant epistemologies and showing how knowledge arises from intersecting histories and cultures. A robust disciplinary understanding emerges not from a single tradition alone, but through disciplined engagement across diverse socio-epistemic formations. As Fataar (2025) observed, a contrapuntal approach positions marginalised epistemologies as generative resources for curriculum renewal. The classroom thus becomes a space where knowledge is dynamic, contested, and open to debate. In this sense, epistemic ascent is inseparable from epistemic justice: it is not only about cultivating deeper understanding, but also about affirming the intellectual worth of diverse traditions and enabling students to engage them on equal terms.

Gen AI can play a role in this environment, but it should remain a support rather than a lead. It can aid conceptual modelling, provide feedback, and stimulate comparison—particularly in tasks of revision, interpretation, and dialogue. Properly framed, Gen AI strengthens thinking without replacing it, embedded in a broader ecosystem that values reasoning, ethical engagement, and creativity. Epistemic ascent thus offers a principled guide for the university's public purpose. It affirms education as the work of helping students create meaning, act with discernment, and imagine alternative futures. In classrooms designed with care and clarity, this vision can still be realised patiently and gradually, sustaining the human promise of learning.

## **Pedagogical transformation, Gen AI, and the struggle for epistemic justice**

Supporting epistemic ascent in the university classroom requires more than adjusting teaching techniques. It calls for a redefinition of pedagogy itself as a practice oriented toward justice, dignity, and conceptual depth. At stake, is the university's capacity to provide structured opportunities for students to deepen their understanding, engage critically with disciplinary frameworks, and relate learning meaningfully to their lived realities. Pedagogical transformation, in this sense, extends epistemic ascent into the domain of justice, affirming all students as intellectual agents whose contributions matter not only for their own growth but also for the renewal of knowledge and society (Fricker, 2007). Fricker's notion of epistemic injustice reminds us that when students' voices, experiences, or capacities are disregarded, they are denied recognition as legitimate knowers. In the age of Gen AI, this risk intensifies; the apparent fluency of machine outputs can obscure the need for authentic student reasoning and diminish opportunities for recognition. Avoiding such injustice requires deliberate pedagogical design that ensures students are not reduced to consumers of Gen AI-generated knowledge but are supported as active contributors to conceptual development.

This transformation is challenging. It will inevitably happen within constraints such as large classes, heavy teaching and administrative responsibilities, and institutional cultures that often prioritise compliance and output over educational depth. The rise of Gen AI has disrupted the traditional structure of teaching and assessment, increasing the urgency of pedagogical renewal while complicating it. In this difficult environment, a more innovative approach to pedagogy becomes essential. Central to this approach is a commitment to deliberate design (Kalantzis & Cope, 2025). Teaching aimed at supporting epistemic growth and insight (Blackie & Luckett, 2024) must be adaptable and carefully organised. Instead of seeing curriculum merely as a means of delivery, it should be regarded as a space for inquiry, connection, and guided conceptual progression. In such environments, students are encouraged to engage with tasks that connect their everyday knowledge to disciplinary ideas, pose open interpretive questions, and conclude with applications that demonstrate an understanding of ethics and context.

Cope and Kalantzis (2015, pp. 1–36) offered a suitable framework for this type of pedagogy through four interconnected processes: experiencing, conceptualising, analysing, and applying. These are not rigid steps in a fixed order but dimensions of learning that intersect and recur. Experience grounds students in what they know and observe. Conceptualisation introduces and organises disciplinary knowledge. Analysis sharpens discernment by questioning assumptions and implications. The application reinforces transfer by prompting students to implement what they have learned in new contexts. Together, these movements support a form of epistemic ascent rooted in both lived knowledge and conceptual structure.

Gen AI connects to teaching in many ways. It can model arguments, present ideas in different forms, and inspire new thinking. When used carefully, it broadens students' resources and allows for richer expression. When used recklessly, it becomes a shortcut that reduces the intellectual effort of learning. The issue is not Gen AI itself, but how it is incorporated into pedagogy.

Educators' pedagogical presence is crucial because learning activities should promote interpretation, evaluation, and critical judgment. Gen AI must not replace human thought; instead, it should be regarded as a resource for students to question, adapt, and develop. In this way, Gen AI becomes part of a wider learning environment grounded in dialogue, ethical reflection, and relational reasoning.

Such transformation is demanding and cannot rely solely on individual effort. Universities must create conditions that allow lecturers to experiment, collaborate, and develop new practices. This involves offering professional support, time for reflection, and recognising teaching as a creative and intellectual pursuit. Without such support, transformative pedagogy risks becoming just another burden for already overstretched academics. Nevertheless, the pursuit remains crucial. Universities are responsible for ensuring all students engage with specialised knowledge, think critically about it, and contribute to its development. This is a matter of epistemic justice, not merely token inclusion, but affirming each student's right to think, understand, and act with knowledge. From this perspective, the classroom becomes a space of potential. It equips students to think critically and engage meaningfully with the complexities of their time. It encourages judgment, analytical discipline, and ethical awareness, which are essential skills for supporting democracy, promoting care, and facing uncertain futures. Although progress may be gradual and inconsistent, it remains valuable because it aligns with the university's core purpose.

### **Gen AI as a site of pedagogical contestation**

In higher education, debates about the role of pedagogy have resurfaced with the rise of Gen AI. Its primary function is often framed in administrative and technical terms, accelerating content creation, feedback, and coding. While this reduces workloads, it privileges efficiency over deep learning, positioning Gen AI as a tool of optimisation rather than interpretation (Selwyn, 2019, 2024). These developments carry important implications for epistemic ascent, the process by which students move from experiential to abstract and relational understanding. Such shifts can produce the appearance of success without cultivating genuine conceptual depth (Hordern, 2016). In these contexts, learning risks becoming performative, undermining the cumulative effort required for sustained intellectual growth.

The risks are particularly acute for students facing structural inequalities. Those experiencing digital exclusion, linguistic marginalisation, or limited recognition of their cultural knowledge may see Gen AI not as empowering but as threatening their epistemic agency. As Fricker (2007) noted, epistemic injustice arises when individuals are denied recognition as credible knowers, and Medina (2013) extended this by showing how marginalised groups resist silencing through alternative epistemic practices. When used uncritically, Gen AI can reproduce these injustices by generating generic outputs that obscure local insights and silence student contributions. Instead of opening disciplinary dialogue, Gen AI may oversimplify complexity and reinforce narrow standards of academic legitimacy.

Yet Gen AI is not inherently opposed to pedagogical depth. Its presence invites educators to recontextualise it within generative frameworks that emphasise interpretation, dialogue, and conceptual clarity. Properly mediated, Gen AI can support epistemic growth—helping students explore multiple perspectives, visualise abstract relationships, and refine their ideas through revision and iteration (Blackie & Lockett, 2024; Kalantzis & Cope, 2025). Such practices do not replace thinking; they create opportunities for reflection on meaning and the construction of knowledge.

Reorienting pedagogy in this way is far from straightforward. Massified universities, characterised by large classes, limited time, and escalating performance pressures, make it difficult to sustain deep learning (Luescher et al., 2023). Even so, small but deliberate shifts in curriculum and assessment design can begin to re-establish classrooms as spaces of discernment and inquiry. Within such spaces, students are not only supported in their use of Gen AI but also encouraged to evaluate, adapt, and critically examine its epistemic implications. Educators, in turn, act as mediators who design tasks that move students beyond surface outputs toward processes of comparison, argumentation, and ethical reflection. In this way, Gen AI becomes integrated into a broader learning ecology rooted in human judgment, conceptual exploration, and social responsibility. The institutional setting is also crucial. Pedagogical renewal cannot be left to individuals alone. Universities must provide professional development, time for experimentation, and supportive infrastructure if Gen AI is to serve learning rather than efficiency alone (Motala et al., 2023). This includes recognising the labour required to build inclusive, dialogical, and epistemically rich classrooms.

Framed in this way, Gen AI is less a technical challenge than a pedagogical and ethical one. It compels universities to ask whether they will continue along a path of transactional performance or reorient towards critical inquiry, ethical formation, and epistemic justice. The stakes are especially high for students whose knowledge systems have long been marginalised. Recognising them as knowers, rather than as producers of outputs, demands pedagogical practices that integrate Gen AI critically and carefully. The present moment, therefore, requires careful experimentation. Gen AI should neither be embraced uncritically nor rejected outright, but engaged as part of a broader reflection on what it means to learn in an age shaped by automation and unpredictability. The task is to preserve an open pedagogical space in which students are recognised, challenged, and supported to cultivate deeper understanding and agency. In this sense, responding to Gen AI's challenge is not a technical adjustment but an opportunity to renew higher education's commitment to epistemic ascent.

### **Rethinking pedagogical practice: Design, interpretation, and conceptual development**

One promising response lies in the shift towards task-based, meaning-rich learning designs that position students as interpreters and contributors to knowledge (Laurillard, 2012). Building on Laurillard's idea of teaching as a design science, learning is not the passive transfer of information

but the careful design of opportunities for inquiry, dialogue, and knowledge construction. Such approaches align with the concerns of Fricker (2007) and Medina (2013), who remind us that students must be recognised as credible knowers and supported to resist epistemic silencing. Designing for interpretation and conceptual growth thus becomes not only a pedagogical imperative but also a matter of epistemic justice. Rather than emphasising content delivery or superficial performance, this approach begins by designing tasks that connect students' social and intellectual worlds with disciplinary knowledge. Tasks are not exercises in recall but opportunities for interpretation, analysis, and application. Through them, students move between practical experience and abstract frameworks, developing the capacity to engage with complex ideas and reframe them in meaningful ways.

Across various disciplines, this design principle appears in different ways. In the humanities, a student might explore historical patterns by combining community stories with archival materials to create a multimodal essay or digital exhibition. In the sciences, a physics student might tackle energy insecurity by modelling systems, analysing data, and proposing solutions. In both fields, Gen AI can assist with visualisation or simulation, but conceptual reasoning, evaluation, and ethical reflection remain central.

Teacher education offers another example; reflecting on personal schooling experiences, such as language exclusion, provides the foundation for theoretical analysis and the design of responsive artefacts like multilingual lesson plans or micro-teaching sessions. These processes enable students to develop their voices as both learners and professional practitioners. In business or professional fields, design-based tasks can be collaborative and socially relevant, such as investigating campus food insecurity, applying economic models, and proposing social enterprise solutions. The outputs, such as policy briefs, prototypes, or reports, become artefacts of layered intellectual work that blend abstraction, research, and ethical decision-making.

Tasks of this kind also highlight the importance of multiple modes of expression, including textual, visual, oral, and digital modes. Here, Cope and Kalantzis's (2023) concept of transposable grammar extends the emphasis on design by showing how conceptual structures can be transferred across contexts and modes while preserving coherence and meaning. Unlike Gen AI, which generates outputs without discernment, humans engage in this transfer through judgment, ethical reasoning, and contextual awareness. Viewed this way, transposable grammar provides the framework through which pedagogy supports epistemic ascent, enabling students to rework ideas across forms and transition from lived experience to a deeper, disciplinary understanding. As an analytical tool, transposable grammar explains how effective teaching creates conditions for flexible and integrative learning. It shows how students discern patterns, identify organising principles, and apply knowledge in unfamiliar contexts. This sheds light on epistemic transition and translation at the core of education—learning involves more than shifting modes or platforms; it requires the intellectual capacity to preserve meaning as ideas are reformulated and expanded.

Within this framework, Gen AI can support meaning-making, but only when integrated into

designs that highlight human interpretive effort. Gen AI may generate alternative representations or stimulate new questions, but students must evaluate, refine, and recontextualise its outputs, applying coherence and ethical reasoning to ensure that meaning deepens rather than diminishes. Seen through the combined lenses of Laurillard's (2012) design science, Cope and Kalantzis's (2023) transposable grammar, and Fricker's (2007) and Medina's (2013) insistence on epistemic justice, pedagogy affirms students' lives and situated knowledge as resources while engaging disciplines critically and rigorously. The university classroom becomes a space where knowledge is dynamic and adaptable, open to exploration, recontextualisation, and rearticulation. Pedagogy, in this vision, involves the careful structuring of opportunities for students to maintain conceptual coherence, enhance communication across modes, and promote epistemic development.

### **Reclaiming the university's epistemic mission**

Through epistemic ascent, students develop the capacity to navigate complexity, reason with care, and act with discernment. This reflects what Barnett (2000) identified as the university's central challenge in an age of supercomplexity—enabling students to move beyond everyday understanding toward knowledge that is abstract, conceptually rigorous, and ethically attuned. The university, in this view, is not simply a site of knowledge transfer but a space where students cultivate critical presence, deepen insight, and prepare for meaningful participation in a world marked by uncertainty and change. In an era shaped by Gen AI, this mission acquires new urgency. Gen AI can produce fluent responses, but often without the conceptual architecture or ethical reflection that signal genuine understanding. If uncritically adopted, it risks reducing education to simulation, where apparent proficiency masks shallow comprehension and efficiency undermines depth.

Yet Gen AI need not erode the university's epistemic role. Used carefully, it can broaden access, assist in visualising complexity, and stimulate inquiry while ensuring that meaning-making remains grounded in human reasoning, ethical judgment, and conceptual effort. In this way, Gen AI can serve as a catalyst for the principled pursuit of learning rather than a substitute for it. Reaffirming the university's epistemic purpose, therefore, requires renewed attention to the human dimensions of education. Pedagogy must emphasise abstraction, interpretation, and reflection—the faculties through which students engage with ideas, establish links across contexts, and develop the interpretive skills needed to navigate supercomplex realities (Barnett, 2000; Biesta, 2010).

This educational work begins in the classroom. It unfolds in the encounter between student and teacher, experience and theory, memory and imagination, where the foundations of conceptual growth are laid. Here, learning is a relational act, sustained by dialogue, ethical questioning, and disciplined inquiry (Alexander, 2008). Students are not passive recipients but active sense-makers, guided to grapple with ideas, explore tensions, and build rigorous and responsive knowledge. Central to this vision are learning tasks designed for interpretive engagement. Such tasks draw on students' lived experiences while inducting them into the specialised languages and logics of

disciplines (Bernstein, 2000). As they move between experiential insight and abstract reasoning, students develop the ability to think relationally and reframe knowledge in socially meaningful ways. Within these settings, Gen AI can play a constructive but bounded role. It may offer representational support, generate alternative perspectives, or provoke new questions, but its true value lies in designs that highlight human judgment and ethical reflection. The aim is not to replicate human thought but to strengthen the conditions under which it develops.

The epistemic mission of the university thus resists reduction to content delivery or procedural mastery. It rejects techno-rational logics that privilege speed, standardisation, and output at the expense of intellectual growth. Instead, it embraces knowledge as evolving, contextual, and open to renewal through dialogue and critique. It recognises students as co-creators of meaning and universities as spaces for shaping thoughtful, just, and adaptable forms of life. Realising this vision requires institutional commitment. Universities must invest in pedagogical innovation, support curriculum redesign, and affirm teaching as serious intellectual labour. They must engender cultures in which staff and students collaborate to build learning trajectories that combine epistemic rigour with social relevance. In reclaiming their epistemic mission, universities reaffirm their public purpose. They contribute not only to economic participation but also to ethical judgment, historical awareness, and critical imagination. In the age of Gen AI, this mission is sharpened as a renewed commitment to understanding, learning, and acting with care.

### **Reclaiming the classroom through design-based assessment**

Reclaiming the educational mission begins in the classroom, where students acquire knowledge, exercise judgment, and develop the ability to understand and engage with the world. Today's classrooms are shaped by the intersection of digital technologies and social interactions as students navigate peer relations, lecturer guidance, and Gen AI-generated outputs. These processes combine mental effort, technological mediation, and human relationships—reshaping how meaning is constructed and learning progresses (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Cope et al., 2025a). In this context, assessment becomes crucial. More than a measure of correctness or speed, assessment should illuminate the reasoning pathways through which students develop understanding. Effective assessment demonstrates how concepts are applied, reinterpreted, and refined, while also revealing how students' ideas evolve through dialogue with peers, teachers, and disciplinary traditions. In this sense, assessment is integral to learning itself: a space for clarification, reflection, and revision rather than a final judgement of performance (Carless, 2015).

Such a vision requires moving beyond narrow, summative testing to embracing a variety of developmental practices. Reflective essays connect theoretical concepts with lived experiences, while collaborative projects cultivate the co-creation of knowledge in response to real-world challenges. Portfolios compiled over time make visible the progression of student thinking and the achievement of conceptual depth. Dialogical formats such as peer reviews, debates, and roundtables sharpen arguments through engagement with others, while oral and multimodal

performances assess coherence across narrative, data, and visualisation. Cumulative assignments, including capstone projects, synthesise knowledge across modules and demonstrate its transfer into new contexts. Collectively, these practices affirm that knowledge is constructed through process and dialogue rather than captured solely in final outcomes.

Gen AI adds an important new dimension to this assessment landscape. When thoughtfully designed into learning environments, Gen AI can act as a cognitive partner that supports rather than replaces student thinking (Cope et al., 2025b). It can generate drafts, simulate perspectives, or visualise data. But its educational value lies in how students critique, refine, and contextualise its outputs. For example, a sociology student might ask a Gen AI tool to propose a hypothesis, then analyse its strengths and weaknesses before revising it with disciplinary precision and contextual awareness. In this way, Gen AI becomes a catalyst for reflection and critique, while intellectual effort and responsibility remain firmly with the student.

Assessment must also prioritise equity. In higher education systems marked by persistent inequalities, inclusive design is essential for meaningful participation. Tasks should accommodate diverse levels of digital access, recognise multiple linguistic repertoires, and support varied cognitive styles. Scaffolded assignments, rich feedback environments, and adequate time are especially critical for students from under-resourced backgrounds. Equity-focused assessment affirms students as epistemic agents, recognising the intellectual and ethical labour they contribute through interpretation, dialogue, and revision. When designed in this way, assessment improves conceptual understanding, builds confidence, and strengthens students' sense of belonging in academic life.

For classrooms to embody this vision, institutions must treat teaching and assessment as serious intellectual work. Educators need time and support to design meaningful tasks, experiment with new repertoires, and reflect on student responses. Institutional frameworks should facilitate collaborative, multimodal projects, while policies must prioritise developmental progress over narrow end-point performance (Cope et al., 2025a). Ultimately, reclaiming the classroom requires aligning pedagogy and assessment with the broader aims of education: generating understanding, compassion, and critical thought. Classrooms become vibrant spaces of conceptual development and ethical engagement when institutions recognise teaching as intellectual labour, ensure equitable workloads, and support assessment practices that value learning as an ongoing process. Only then can universities fulfil their public mission of advancing knowledge, nurturing judgment, and promoting justice.

### **Developing institutional pathways for epistemic advancement**

The rise of Gen AI challenges many established practices in university teaching. Pedagogies rooted in content reproduction, procedural fluency, and isolated testing are increasingly inadequate. A new orientation is needed that foregrounds conceptual understanding, ethical reasoning, and the dynamic interplay of human and machine capacities. Crucially, this reorientation cannot rest on individual lecturers alone; it requires sustained institutional

commitment organised around design-rich pedagogy and supported across three interconnected dimensions (Barnett, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2015).

### **Stabilising the pedagogical core**

The first priority is to stabilise the university's pedagogical core: the practices, relationships, and values that make teaching and learning central to academic life. Teaching must be recognised as intellectually rigorous work, essential for advancing knowledge and supporting student growth. This requires careful planning at the institutional level regarding curriculum design, resource distribution, workload management, and performance systems that raise the status of teaching rather than relegating it to a secondary or administrative role (Barnett, 2000; Shay, 2017).

Stabilising this core also involves creating time and space for lecturers to think pedagogically: to design learning pathways, respond to student needs, and provide sustained feedback. Such a foundation supports the integration of diverse knowledge traditions and ways of knowing, enabling students to construct coherent understandings across contexts. In this way, classrooms become dialogical spaces of epistemic growth where design frames knowledge as an interpretive possibility, and students learn to ask questions, trace concepts, and apply ideas across disciplinary and social boundaries.

### **Building capacity for pedagogical design and assessment**

The second imperative is building institutional capacity for pedagogical design. Universities must support educators in developing inquiry-led, multimodal, and socially responsive learning environments. This requires resourcing teams and communities of practice to exchange ideas, experiment with innovations, and reflect critically on challenges. Professional development, in this context, should not be confined to generic workshops but should be grounded in frameworks of knowledge by design (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015, 2025). Such frameworks equip educators with conceptual tools, collaborative spaces, and time to create tasks that connect lived experience with disciplinary knowledge. Institutions must also ensure that digital platforms promote formative feedback, sustained engagement, and multimodal expression (Cope et al., 2025b).

Within these environments, Gen AI can be positioned as a partner in design rather than a substitute for judgment. When used effectively, Gen AI can be used to scaffold exploratory thinking, generate representations, or stimulate conceptual experimentation. But it is through deliberate pedagogical design that Gen AI enriches learning—deepening rather than flattening students' interpretive capacities. Curriculum renewal committees, teaching grants, and recognition systems are essential to embed this work, ensuring that design-rich pedagogy is sustainable rather than peripheral (Cope & Kalantzis, 2023).

### **Reorienting institutional cultures and accountability**

The third dimension is cultural. Universities must reorient away from performance-driven logics that privilege metrics over meaning and instead, cultivate cultures that value pedagogical depth

and ethical inquiry. As Biesta (2010) reminds us, education cannot be reduced to measurement; it must affirm its human, ethical, and democratic purposes. Teaching excellence, accordingly, should be evaluated not by surface outputs but by the richness of designed learning environments, the conceptual journeys students undertake, and the extent to which pedagogy produces epistemic, ethical, and social presence.

Such cultures also require integrating Gen AI literacy and ethical reflection across programmes. Assessments must be reimagined as acts of design: formative processes that support reasoning, adaptation, and reflection rather than mere reproduction (Cope et al., 2025a). In this way, assessment becomes a dialogical tool that supports student voice and intellectual presence. Students are recognised not as outputs to be managed, but as epistemic agents who participate in the ongoing creation of knowledge.

### **Conclusion: Reclaiming the university's epistemic horizon**

The rise of Gen AI has revealed the fragility of educational practices built on reproduction, procedural fluency, and narrow performance metrics. At the same time, it underscores the urgency of reaffirming the university's epistemic mission as a space where students develop the capacity for critical presence and intellectual imagination. What is at stake is not simply the adoption of new technologies but the very purpose of higher education in an age marked by inequality, ecological crisis, and automation. This article has argued that epistemic ascent, which is the progression from lived experience to disciplined, conceptually rigorous understanding, remains central to the university's public role. Extending ascent into the domain of justice (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013) affirms students as knowers whose voices and experiences are indispensable to knowledge-building. However, ascent does not occur spontaneously; it must be enabled through the deliberate structuring of pedagogy and assessment.

As the article argued, the framework of design pedagogy and assessment becomes crucial. By treating teaching as the design of tasks, pathways, and environments, educators create the conditions for students to transition from surface-level reproduction to deeper conceptual engagement. Design-based assessment further ensures that students' reasoning, interpretation, and ethical reflection are made visible, giving form to their intellectual journeys rather than reducing them to outputs or scores. Together, design pedagogy and assessment provide the scaffolding through which epistemic ascent is realised in practice.

The challenge, however, cannot rest solely on individual classrooms. Universities must stabilise their pedagogical core, build institutional capacity for design-rich pedagogy, and reorient cultures of accountability away from metrics and towards meaning. Justice in this context involves affirming students as epistemic agents, designing assessments that reveal the processes of thought, and ensuring that classrooms contribute to a sense of belonging, promote dialogue, and encourage conceptual depth. To reclaim the university's epistemic horizon is to resist the reduction of education to efficiency and simulation, and to envision futures animated by ethical judgment, intellectual presence, and design innovation. Epistemic ascent, supported by deliberate design

pedagogy and assessment, offers a principled guide for revitalising higher education as a space of depth, justice, and human flourishing in the age of Gen AI. For South African universities in particular, this vision resonates with the unfinished project of transformation, where classrooms are not only sites of knowledge but also of restitution, recognition, and the reimagining of futures.

### Statement on use of Gen AI

In preparing this article, I used Grammarly and ChatGPT-5 for language editing, restructuring, and clarity. They were not used to generate arguments, interpret literature, or frame the scholarship. All intellectual content is my own, with AI-assisted text critically reviewed and revised. I thank the two reviewers for their constructive comments. Full responsibility for the article rests with the author.

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# The place, role, and task of religion in education: Human rights considerations and challenges

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## Abstract

This article departs from the standpoint that the place, role, and task of religion in public schools need reconsideration. Present policies rooted in secularism or the accommodation of a variety of confessional religions in schools are deficient in several respects, among others that the essence of religion, its presence in contemporary societies, and its role in the lived experiences of people have not been sufficiently recognised. Furthermore, the purpose and role of education are not adequately considered, and non-Western contexts are not sufficiently reckoned with. Attention should also be given to the current fixation of the scholarly discourse on the role of religion as an instrument for establishing and maintaining state hegemony. Human rights considerations demand, instead, a greater focus on religion in education as an instrument for strengthening the moral fibre of society and for creating social cohesion. To this end, the dynamic nature of religion and the increasing religious diversity in modern society and public schools need to be reconsidered. This has to be done within the framework of what is referred to as the current widely recognised creed of human rights.

**Keywords:** human rights, moral fibre of society, religion education, religious education, secularism, social cohesion

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## Introduction

The United Nations' (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights has given renewed impetus to education expansion in the decades after the Second World War. (Because the conviction that the stipulations of the Declaration must be universally implemented has taken on the form of a belief system, we henceforth refer to this conviction as the "creed" of human rights.) Recognition of human rights as the basis of morally desirable behaviour in the national and international arena, in particular people's right to education, emerged as a strong driver behind the global education expansion project (Sen, 2023). The right to education became a prominent moral rationale for improving education supply. This new impetus behind education supply (in this article, we focus on the schooling aspect of education) now raises the question of whether sufficient attention is being given to religion in education as an instrument for strengthening society's moral fibre and social cohesion. In our opinion, inadequate attention has, up to now, been given to this role of religion. We contend that the discourse about the place and role of religion in education has been biased in favour of the historical role of education, namely, as an instrument for promoting state hegemony and concomitant social cohesion.

We concur with Skeie and Stokke (2022) who, after editing a manuscript on human rights and religious education, concluded that human rights considerations demand a greater focus on religion in education as an instrument for strengthening the moral fibre of society and promoting social cohesion. This phenomenon is not limited to the northern hemisphere but is also observable in African education. Ozioma (2017) highlighted the potential of religious education as a catalyst for development in 21st-century Africa. He contended that integrating moral values through religious teachings could foster personal growth and national advancement, thereby underscoring the transformative impact of religious education. An empirical study by Othoo and Aseu (2022) conducted among secondary school students in Kenya revealed that the Christian Religious Education syllabus and teaching methodologies significantly contributed to students' moral development. The study also identified challenges concerning the pedagogy involved, including the need for more effective teaching strategies and the critical role that teachers should fulfil as moral exemplars. Findings such as these prompted us to reflect on religion's place, role, and task in education.

The purpose of this article is to examine the place, role, and task of religion in education in the context of the increasing recognition of people's basic human rights. To reach this aim, we structured our core theoretical thesis as follows. We begin with an overview of the role of religion in education through the ages. This is followed by a description of how the recognition of basic human rights emerged as the moral framework (creed) for a globalised world. This is, in turn, followed by an overview of the current critique regarding the place, role, and task of religion in education from a human rights perspective. All these threads of the argument are finally woven together in the final section. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a more balanced view of the place, role, and task of religion in education within a human rights dispensation.

## **Religion in education through the ages**

Best evidence indicates that the first schools were established around 3000 BC, in Mesopotamia and Egypt. According to Cohen (1970), schools originated in what he referred to as *civilisation states* such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, Ancient Athens, and Ancient China. These states usually originated from an amalgamation of smaller political units into new, larger political entities. A need arose in these new large political units to train a civil administrative corps because it was deemed essential for the administrative elite to identify with the new state, and to repress previous local political or social loyalties. Schools were instituted in the rulers' palaces to create a class of priest-scribes for this purpose. Cohen's theory suggests that the inculcation of the ruler in question's religion and morality would have been part of the education offered in these schools.

It can be said that the mediaeval European school served as the prototype for the modern school. The two main mediaeval European school types, the cathedral and monastic schools, educated religious leaders for service in the Roman Catholic Church (Boyd & King, 1994). Religious education was at the core of their pedagogical offerings and hence served to morally buttress and legitimise the political order of the day, namely, the twin structure of the Holy Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church. The school as an institution was subsequently exported from Europe to all corners of the globe during the era of colonisation from circa 1500 AD on.

The leaders of the Reformation in the European Church, which commenced in the early 16th century, held that faith and morality should be based on the Bible. They contended that every person should be free and able to read and interpret the Bible for themselves (Duggan, 1916). This view reinforced the idea of formal schooling, at least at the level of elementary education, as the means to enable the entire populace to read the Bible. The Reformation proved to be a religious, moral, as well as political force in that it led to the disintegration of the Roman Catholic Church along ethnic and national lines. In each of the new national education systems that came into existence, the primary schools offered religious and moral education aimed at immersing the upcoming generations in the official, state-sanctioned religious denomination.

The nation-states of Western Europe and beyond, such as in the two Americas, emerged in the early 19th century. A strong relationship between the state, education, and the state-sanctioned religion characterised these states. Education was employed to morally and politically legitimise the state's existence. Religion formed part of the curriculum to reach this aim. In countries such as Germany and Norway, the religious education offered in schools consisted of the teachings of the official state church, and was taught to immerse learners in that religion. In the United States of America, the founding fathers, guided by visions of the country as a haven for refugees and for those persecuted for their religious beliefs—and that in time, resulted in creating a religiously diverse population with a Christian majority—erected a virtual wall between state and religion. This was done to prevent favouring any particular Christian denomination. However, a generic Christian religion emerged which, for a long time, was the philosophic-religious substructure or “public religion” in American schools (Bellah et al., 1985).

In non-Western nation-states, such as Japan, North Korea, and India, a strong relationship between religion, education, and the status of the state also emerged. With the restoration of the Meiji dynasty in Japan (following the feudal Tokugawa period), a new national religion was synthesised from the various regional religions (Buruma, 2003). In North Korea, at variance with the communist view of religion as a sedative for the people, a national religion emerged that portrayed the ruler of the country as a supernatural being worthy of being worshipped by the populace (Armstrong, 2005). The Bhartiya Janata Party (founded in 1980), which came into power in India in 2014 on a Hindutva ticket, reorganised the country's National Council of Educational Research and Training. It then ordered the Council to revise the textbooks prescribed for Indian schools to follow Hindutva beliefs and morality.

Two trends regarding the place, role, and task of religion in education are perceivable after World War II. The first is the trend of growing secularisation—the tendency to remove religion from all public spheres and to limit it to the citizens' personal space only. The second is the tendency to teach religious education in public schools not in the form of confessional but of comparative religion. The purpose of this approach is to introduce students to the various religions in society and the world, thereby cultivating a moral culture of tolerance and respect for religious diversity. Complete secularisation has not occurred in some education systems, mainly due to historical inertia. In Belgium, for instance, schools offer confessional religious instruction in six different denominations/religions, of which students can select one (Loobuyck & Franken, 2011). The historically strong position of the Lutheran Church persists in schools in Finland; students can choose between Religious Education based on Lutheranism or Moral Education. In Norway, all vestiges of the historically state-sanctioned Lutheran religion have been removed and an education system, proclaimed to be religiously neutral, instituted (Hagesaether & Sandsmark, 2006). In the Dutch education system, both public and special schools are funded by the government. Public schools, expected to be religiously neutral, may offer religious education to learners whose parents express a desire for it. Religious education is an integral part of the curriculum in private schools with a Christian character (Vermeer & Franken, 2018). In South Africa, the national Department of Education (2003) decreed that confessional religious education would remain confined to the private realm of the parental home and religious institutions. Schools are allowed to offer comparative religion as an academic subject, and religious observances on an equitable basis.

This brief historical overview demonstrates that religion in education has, up to now, largely been focused on maintaining and bolstering state hegemony and social cohesion to that end. The current wave of secularisation has resulted in a shift from that role and function of religion in education towards the role and task of supporting and strengthening the moral fibre of the citizenry and promoting social cohesion towards this new purpose. Further reflection is required regarding the envisaged new place, role, and task of religion in education. A first step in that direction is to determine whether the creed of human rights, whose development is outlined in the following section, has contributed to this new role and task of religion in education.

### **The creed of human rights: The moral code for a globalised world**

A changing post-Second World War world rendered untenable the sustained use of education and religion to legitimise the existence of the state and to foster state hegemony. This can be ascribed to two interrelated developments. The first was the rise of the creed of human rights as a moral code for a globalising world. The right to freedom of religion and belief was taken to imply that religion should be removed from all public arenas, including public schooling. Confessional religion was, generally speaking, banned from the public domain (including public schools) as part of the current secularisation process. The second development was the rise of increasingly diverse, multicultural (including multireligious) societies. Based on the creed of human rights as a widely accepted moral code, citizenries began showing an appreciation of diversity, thereby preventing the state from foisting its hegemony on the entire populace for the creation of a uniform society.

It is claimed that the Persian ruler Cyrus's Cylinder, dating from circa 539 BC, was the first bill of human rights in history (Kundal, 2023). Holland (2019) traced the modern creed of human rights back to the Christian religion as the historical foundation of the Western mind. The term "human rights" (Spanish: *derechos humanos*) was, as far as could be established, used for the first time in history by Spanish Dominican Friar, Bartholomé de las Casas in 1550 in the city of Valladolid. He did so in settling a controversy about the status and rights of the Amerindians in the Spanish colonies. De las Casas held that all people, Christian or not, were entitled to a set of basic human rights as human beings.

Modern political theory has taken great strides since the 17th century when Bishop Jacques-Benigne Bossuet (1627–1704) formulated the theory of the Divine Rights of Kings. This was a theoretical exposition of mediaeval European beliefs and 17th-century views of kings as God's chosen leaders on earth, endowed with absolute power. In the Enlightenment period that ensued in the next century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) propounded his Social Contract Theory. This theory contested the notion of political authorities possessing absolute power. He suggested that the notion of political authorities with absolute powers should be replaced by the view that citizens willingly ceded some of their innate (natural) power and rights to state authorities. They do so in exchange for certain other rights, such as the right to safety and ownership of property.

Eighteenth-century philosophers such as Christian Wolff (1679–1754), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and above all, John Locke (1632–1704) propounded the idea of natural, universal, inalienable human rights to the philosophical discourse. By the end of the century, the principle of human rights was enshrined in the constitutions of the United States of America and France. The Constitution of the United States of America and the changes brought about by the Glorious Revolution in the United Kingdom confirmed the ruling power of parliament (the body representing the citizenry). This development gave impetus to the ideal of democracy, the sovereignty of the (majority) of the people. This advance was taken further by Woodrow Wilson who advocated for the right to the self-determination of nations at the institution of the League of Nations after the conclusion of the First World War. Principles such as these were included in the

Atlantic Charter, which Franklin Roosevelt concluded in 1941 with Great Britain when the United States of America entered into the Second World War.

The atrocious events in the run-up to and during the Second World War caused states and their citizens to be wary of the unchecked sovereignty or power of the state or any elected majority. Such caution paved the way for the adoption of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The issue of human rights became internationalised, not only by its adoption by the United Nations and the Atlantic Charter (United Kingdom & United States, 1941) but also by the engagement of International Jurists in the discourse in 1952. On 10 December 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. This *Declaration* became the proto-document of several other human rights manifestoes, and a reference point in the unfolding of the discourse on human rights (United Nations, n.d.). Human rights became part of many national constitutions and regional treaties, such as the American Convention of Human Rights (Organization of American States, 1969), the Organization of African Unity's (1981) African Charter on Human and People's Rights, and the European Union's (2000) Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The right to self-determination by both citizens and nations (states) was expected to be extended to the extra-Western world after the conclusion of the Second World War. After the end of the Cold War in 1989, the creed of human rights became a moral code for a constantly globalising world (Prozesky, 2018). It still today, possesses this status but has come under threat due to the 21st-century regression of states, the decline of democracy, the rise of populism, and growing geopolitical unrest around the globe.

Karel Vasak (1977) distinguished between first-generation human rights, second-generation human rights, and third-generation human rights. First-generation human rights are essential liberties such as the right to vote, freedom of speech and religion, and to be fairly treated before the law. Second-generation human rights are economic and social rights, for example, the right to housing, health services, and social security. The granting of such rights depends on the resources the state has at its disposal. Third-generation rights are group or collective rights, such as the right to self-determination (see Cornescu, 2009).

The recognition of human rights discussed in this section has evolved over centuries. The circumstances surrounding the Second World War accelerated this development, leading to what can now be referred to as the creed of human right—a moral code for the entire world. The following section examines whether this moral code can assist in defining the foreseen new role, place, and task of religion in education.

## **The envisaged new place, role, and task of religion in education from a human rights perspective**

The scholarly discourse on the place of religion in education coincides to a large extent with the rise of the creed of human rights as a moral code for a globalising world. It also coincides with the growth of secularisation in the form of integrative, comparative, confessionally neutral education in public schools. In our opinion, this “neutral” education approach is flawed in at least three respects: (1) it is a contravention or violation of the learners and their parents’ human rights, (2) it reveals a misapprehension of the nature of religion, its place, role, and task in the world and the school context, and (3) the current creed of human rights in general, and how it is deemed to be put to practice concerning religious education in schools appear to be biased towards the interests (hegemony) of the Global North. We attend to these issues in turn below.

### **Contravention or violation of the learners and their parents’ human rights**

It is difficult to describe the learner’s (student’s, educand’s) right to freedom of religion and belief, as Lindhardt (2022) correctly pointed out. The educand is not yet mature enough to make decisions about their freedom of religion, faith, and belief. They have to be guided by their educators (parents, teachers, influential, or significant persons in their lives) towards a stage where they can make their own decisions. The question is, however, at which point in the teaching–learning (education, schooling) process can such guidance be seen as defensible guiding, equipping, and enabling—or as indoctrination? Another question: Can the current tendency towards secularisation in public education be squared with the human rights principle that a parent should be in a position to decide about the sort of education they would prefer for their child? Does it not infringe on the basic right of parents to confront them with a Hobson’s choice: either allow your child to attend a secularised public school that only offers integrative or comparative religious education—or enrol the child in an expensive private school?

An analysis by van der Walt and colleagues (2010) revealed that all religions possessed the same ontic structure: an outer dogmatic layer, an intermediate ritual layer, a deeper pistic layer, and at the very inner level, a spiritual layer. All these layers of religion have an impact on the total being of a person; they determine their views and understanding of everything in the world and life. It can therefore be argued that the official banning of confessional religious education from the public school curriculum, following the demands of secularisation, and offering only integrative and/or comparative “academic” religious studies can be deemed to be a violation of the human rights principle that the education a child enjoys should contribute to their total development as a human being.

### **Misapprehension of the nature of religion, its place, role, and task in the world and the school context**

The current treatment of confessional religion in society calls for radical reconsideration also because of the presence of at least two new religious trends in contemporary society. The first of these is the persistent presence of religion, albeit in new and more complex forms. Despite

frequently made claims that the modern age can be typified as a post-religious secular age, religion is still present as an important factor in individual lives and social dynamics. A recent survey in 230 countries found that 84 per cent of the global population still regarded themselves as affiliated with some or other religion (Pew Research Center, 2017). The situation is, however, complicated by four circumstances: The first is the growth of multireligious societies as part of the multicultural composition of modern societies. The second is that many people consider themselves to be religious but do not belong to an organised religious community. The third is that people tend to no longer fit into neat categories such as “Christian,” or “Sikh,” or “Muslim” but have developed unique personal belief systems. Finally, some people regard themselves as spiritual but not religious, some as both spiritual and religious, and others somewhere on the continuum between these two extremes. Yet others regard themselves as neither spiritual nor religious or associate themselves with the rising philosophy of post-theism. They do so by creating space in their philosophical scheme for (a) God or god in cases where science cannot solve a conundrum or provide guidance in difficult situations. They are not prepared to attach themselves religiously to the idea or concept of divinity unique to a particular religion (du Toit, 2020). A case in point is the standpoint of the Dutch theologian Kuitert, who moved away from an orthodox reformational standpoint to one that approaches post-theism. His new theological stance led him to assert that all discourse about the divine originates from a human perspective. Ultimately, he concluded, humans are unable to say anything meaningful about God or the divine (Flipse, 2017). His post-theist stance was an echo of Baruch Spinoza’s view in the 17th century that to believe in an anthropomorphic image of God one should see nature (creation) as the manifestation of the divine.

The second trend pertains to the functions of religion in people’s lives and society. According to Proulx (2007), religion serves the following four functions in these contexts: it gives meaning and purpose to life and the world, it supports identity formation, it creates a common moral basis for society, and it provides support in coping with the demands of life and the world. The many new circumstances and developments in the world today, such as the ecological crisis, the rise of populism, and the decline of democracy, compel educators (parents, teachers) and learners to consider resorting to these four classic functions of religion. This has also to be done in education, in particular in religious education. Attending to them within the framework of religious education in schools will arguably contribute to the strengthening of the moral fibre of society.

### **Bias towards the interests (hegemony) of the Global North**

There is, finally, the matter of human rights not being as universally recognised and adhered to as has been hoped. It is not difficult to find publications in the field of Comparative and International Education declaring that in large parts of the world, local (national) and international pressures exerted by contextual imperatives have co-shaped, and in some instances distorted or perverted the notion of human rights. In her study of the human rights education received by police officers in India, Rachel Wahl (2016) discovered that after having taken the course, the police officers went on to employ what they had learned to defeat the very objectives of human rights education to

pursue their own self-interests. Zembylas (2017) argued for an alternative, decolonial re-design of human rights education that would create space for pedagogical praxis along social justice lines (also see Zembylas et al., 2014). Another annulment of some of the tenets of the creed of human rights is the tendency to persist with the view of circumscribing human rights within the parameters of the state as *summum bonum*. According to Sen (2023), the human rights education as offered in textbooks in Turkish schools from 1949 till at least 1988 was laid out as part of a militaristic vision, namely, that it was natural for Turkish citizens to sacrifice their lives for national duties. Teachers were required to teach the importance of military service as well as to take learners to military ceremonies. The education programme made it clear to learners that only those who fulfilled their duties to the state could lay claim to human rights.

Another aspect of the hoped-for universality of human rights is the one-sided emphasis on the Global North of human rights education scholarship (Wolhuter, 2024). To a large extent, the edifice of human rights education still rests on research done in Northern Hemispheric contexts. The extent of this bias can be observed by looking at the geographic spread of articles and the authorship provenance of articles published in the *Human Rights Education Review* (<https://humanrer.org/index.php/human/about>) since its inception.

The rise of the creed of human rights and secularisation has resulted in confessional religion being expelled from education/schools. Religion nevertheless remains present in the personal lives of citizens and, by extension, in society. It is therefore necessary to formulate our standpoint regarding the place, role, and task of religion in education, especially given that the notion of “neutral” education falls short in light of the creed of human rights.

### **A more equitable human rights perspective on the place, role, and task of religion in education**

Historically, and specifically during the 18th-century incubation period of the modern creed of human rights, education did not play a key role in discourses on or during the conceptualisation of such rights. Education became an item on the human rights agenda only by the middle of the 20th century. This development led to the United Nations declaring in its Universal Declaration on Human Rights as follows about education:

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality.
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children. (1948, Article 26)

The general terms in which this document dealt with the right to education were followed up in various other human rights manifestos, usually in nations’ constitutions and legal documents. It

also appears in both the public and the scholarly discourse on education. In due course, at least primary and even lower secondary education came to be recognised as a basic human right. This was the case by the time the Education for All movement was launched in 1990 as part of the Jomtien Declaration (UNESCO, 1990).

The rise of the creed of human rights coincided with, and was indeed a strong motivational force behind, the global education expansion and reform project. This project can be regarded as one of the distinguishing features of the post-Second World War era (Baker, 2014; Boli et al., 1985). The extent of this project can be seen in the surge in higher education enrolment based on increases at the primary and secondary education levels. The global gross enrolment ratio in higher education rose from 5 per cent to 41 per cent; higher education enrolment increased from 6.3 million to 254.3 million in the period from 1950 to 2022 (UNESCO, 1971; Our World in Data, 2023).

The creed of human rights remained one of the major drivers behind this global education growth (Sen, 2023; Wolhuter & van der Walt, 2019). The basic right to education was not limited to access to education only but also included the other three components that the United Nations later included in its conceptualisation of human rights education:

- (a) Education *about* human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection;
- (b) Education *through* human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both teachers and students;
- (c) Education *for* human rights includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others. (2011, p. 3, emphasis added)

As explained earlier, freedom of religion and belief appeared in Vasak's (1977) scheme as a first-generation human right, that is, as a most basic human right. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights therefore correctly stipulated that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. (United Nations, 1948)

The three strands of the argument that have so far unfolded in this article—human rights, religion, and education—can now be woven together to create two sets of directives for the provision of public education. The first set of directives, as Lindhardt (2022) has formulated it, entails the following:

- Education, being directed to the development of the full development of the human personality, should include religious education. This refers to religious education of a kind where the educand is schooled in religious beliefs as a set of personal beliefs.

- Parents have a prior right to decide what kind of religious education this religious education should be.
- At the same time, the students' right to freedom of religion and belief should be respected.

The second set of directives entails that learners should be made acquainted with the range of religious beliefs or religious systems in the world. Integrative or comparative religious education should, together with confessional religious education, form part of the curriculum as a means to fully achieve the aim of educating about human rights, through human rights, and for human rights.

These guidelines stem from the conviction, as stated above, that religious education (RE) is of crucial importance in light of the creed of human rights. RE strengthens the moral fibre of society and fosters social cohesion by promoting ethical awareness, mutual understanding, and shared values among diverse sub-groups (Unser & Kuropka, 2024). RE provides students with a critical understanding of various religious and non-religious worldviews and encourages empathy, tolerance, and respect. By exploring shared human experiences and ethical dilemmas, RE cultivates virtues such as compassion, justice, and responsibility, which are essential for social well-being. Balanced RE also aligns with democratic ideals in that it emphasises freedom of thought and respect for diversity. Studies suggest that RE mitigates prejudice, reduces social exclusion, and fosters a sense of belonging by encouraging dialogue and critical engagement (Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2015). By attending to shared ethical values across religious and secular systems, RE reinforces communal bonds and nurtures a collective identity. Moreover, RE serves as a bridge between cultural and religious communities, promotes inclusion, and reduces conflict. Through its focus on dialogue and critical reflection, RE also balances individual freedoms with societal values, thereby contributing positively to social cohesion (Pirner, 2016). When thoughtfully implemented, religious education bolsters society's moral framework, thereby contributing to cohesive, harmonious communities characterised by growing ethical awareness, mutual respect, and shared understanding.

## **Conclusion**

We commenced the discussion in this article with the question of whether sufficient attention has been given to religion in education as an instrument for strengthening the moral fibre of society and for creating social cohesion. Our examination of the historic role of education revealed that religion has been closely connected with the supply of education, and employed to buttress and legitimise the political order and hegemony of the day.

When a turnaround came in this approach by the mid-20th century, religious education was either banned from the public domain and hence from public schools (due to secularisation) or restricted to a limited choice of religions. Our examination of how the creed of human rights unfolded, how the widely recognised right to at least basic education led to phenomenal global growth in education provision, and also how the right to freedom of religion and belief has been supported by the international community, leads us to conclude that, from a human rights perspective, the

proffering of confessional religious education cannot be denied to the upcoming generations. Not doing so will amount to a violation of learners' and their parents' human rights. Ways and means have to be found to include confessional religious instruction in the curriculums of public schools so as to comply with the stipulations of the creed of human rights. To achieve all of the above is no mean task. Education practice in the contemporary world is still far from achieving this ideal.

Education authorities are called upon, in light of these conclusions, to revisit the creed of human rights from a Global South perspective. This should be done so that in those parts of the globe, forms of religious education that are consonant with the demands of education and religion as they manifest in particular societies or communities can be offered. This has to be achieved in ways that do not continue promoting the interests of Northern hegemony.

### Authors' note

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# Transforming early childhood education through community gardens: A participatory action learning approach

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## Abstract

Early childhood education in South Africa remains strongly influenced by traditional models that emphasise memorisation and teacher-centred practices, often at the expense of children's curiosity and ecological awareness. This study investigates how integrating community gardens into early childhood development (ECD) centres can foster more participatory and transformative pedagogical practices. Guided by participatory action learning and action research (PALAR), the research employed self-study and arts-based methods, specifically memory drawings, with four ECD teachers alongside insights from parents and community members. The findings illustrate how community gardens function as dynamic learning spaces that nurture children's connection to their environment, encourage intergenerational knowledge exchange, and promote collaborative teaching and learning. The study demonstrates that PALAR-supported reflection enabled educators to critically interrogate their practices, moving beyond entrenched teacher-centred methods towards co-constructive, contextually grounded pedagogy. By highlighting the potential of community gardens to advance relational and place-based approaches in ECD, this research contributes to debates on sustainable, community-integrated education in South Africa

**Keywords:** early childhood development, community gardens, PALAR, arts-based methods, memory drawings, teacher reflection

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## **Introduction**

Early childhood development (ECD) is foundational to lifelong learning and holistic human development. The early years shape children's cognitive, social-emotional, and physical growth, laying the foundation for future participation in society (Department of Education, 2001). However, in South Africa, ECD remains strongly influenced by colonial-era and teacher-centred pedagogical traditions (Hoadley & Jansen, 2014; Torenbeek et al., 2011). These approaches often emphasise rote memorisation, standardisation, and compliance (Mustalahti et al., 2023; Mwinsa & Dagada, 2025) while paying limited attention to curiosity, agency, or ecological consciousness—key elements of a transformative and sustainable pedagogy (Shahjahan et al., 2021). Globally, scholars have highlighted the need to rethink early education to better align with children's lived realities and contemporary challenges such as climate change, inequality, and cultural disconnection (Gruenewald, 2003; Orr, 1992). However, in the South African ECD sector, pedagogical innovation often struggles against entrenched teacher-centred practices and limited integration of local, Indigenous, and community-based knowledge (Frank, 2024). This gap signals the need for approaches that are not only dialogical and inquiry-driven but also rooted in community contexts and ecological sustainability.

Drawing on Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, this study argues that ECD should move away from the "banking" model of education where learners passively receive knowledge to approaches that are dialogical, problem-posing, and responsive to social and ecological contexts. Community gardens provide one such contextually grounded, practice-based intervention. They offer opportunities for experiential, relational learning, while also fostering intergenerational knowledge sharing and ecological awareness (Gray et al., 2022; Mustalahti et al., 2023). Despite a growing body of research on participatory pedagogies, little is known about how community gardens can be integrated into ECD centres in South Africa, or how such spaces can transform teacher practices shaped by colonial legacies and rote-based instruction. This gap highlights the need for empirical research on how participatory, community-based methods can support more inclusive and sustainable forms of early childhood education.

This study investigates how community gardens, facilitated through participatory action learning and action research (PALAR), can serve as dynamic and transformative learning spaces in ECD contexts. Using self-study and arts-based methods, particularly memory drawings, it examines how four ECD teachers critically reflected on their pedagogical histories, disrupted entrenched practices, and reimagined more collaborative and ecologically responsive approaches to teaching. In doing so, the study seeks to understand how community gardens function as pedagogical spaces in ECD centres, in what ways PALAR and arts-based methods can support teacher reflection and professional growth, and how community involvement including teachers, parents, and local members can contribute to more sustainable and contextually relevant practices in early education.

To address these challenges in South African ECD, this study turns to PALAR as a guiding framework. PALAR offers a critical alternative to teacher-centred models by promoting collaboration, reflection, and recognition of diverse ways of knowing. It is particularly relevant for

reimagining ECD through community gardens because it provides both the theoretical grounding and methodological tools to engage educators, parents, and communities in co-constructing knowledge. The following section reviews key scholarship on PALAR and its principles, highlighting why it is well suited to support participatory, culturally responsive, and ecologically grounded pedagogical practices.

### **Literature review: PALAR as a transformative pedagogical approach**

PALAR has emerged as a transformative methodology within the broader action research tradition, grounded in commitments to social change, ethical practice, and community-driven transformation (Armstrong et al., 2022). Scholars have emphasised PALAR's potential to bridge the gap between formal education and community contexts, fostering civic responsibility and socially engaged pedagogy (McAlister et al., 2019; Scher et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2023). While widely used in social research and professional learning, its application within early childhood education (ECD) remains underexplored. This study positions PALAR as a promising framework to interrogate entrenched teacher-centred practices and reimagine pedagogy in more participatory and sustainable ways. At its core, PALAR challenges hierarchical, transmission-based models of education by foregrounding three interrelated principles—relationships, reflection, and recognition—that align closely with Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Wood, 2021). These principles enable educators and communities to co-create knowledge, disrupt power imbalances, and cultivate practices of freedom in teaching and learning.

PALAR stresses the building of authentic, reciprocal relationships based on trust and respect. This process shifts traditional teacher–student hierarchies towards more dialogical, collaborative forms of engagement, echoing Freire's (1970) call for education as a humanising and liberatory act. Studies show that such relationships are essential for sustained collaboration between educators and communities (Armstrong et al., 2022; Scher et al., 2023; Wood, 2021). A second cornerstone of PALAR is critical reflection. Far from being surface level, reflection here aligns with Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientização*—the process of developing critical awareness of structural conditions. Through cycles of triple-loop learning (Liu, 2013; Wood, 2021), educators interrogate not only their practices but also the ideologies and power structures that shape them. This deep reflexivity is key to disrupting entrenched pedagogical routines and fostering professional growth.

The third principle, recognition, calls for valuing diverse epistemologies and lived experiences, particularly those historically marginalised in education (McAteer & Wood, 2018). By resisting Eurocentric, top-down knowledge production (Foucault, 1977), PALAR encourages teachers and communities to reclaim Indigenous and local ways of knowing. In the South African ECD context, this principle is vital; it positions children, parents, and educators as co-constructors of knowledge, breaking down hierarchies that exclude cultural and ecological perspectives (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2022, 2024). Arts-based methods such as memory drawings and group dialogues provide concrete tools for this recognition, enabling educators to interrogate their own histories while reimagining culturally and ecologically relevant practice.

Taken together, these principles illustrate why PALAR is particularly suited to the task of rethinking early childhood education. It not only aligns with critical, participatory pedagogies but also provides methodological strategies for engaging teachers and communities in cycles of dialogue, reflection, and transformation. By situating community gardens within a PALAR framework, this study contributes to a growing body of work that views education as both a collective and emancipatory process. While the literature demonstrates PALAR's potential to foster participatory and contextually grounded pedagogy, its transformative power in this study is best understood through the lens of Paulo Freire's (1970, 1974) critical pedagogy. The following theoretical framework situates PALAR within a Freirean perspective, highlighting how both traditions inform the study's focus on dialogue, reflection, and the co-construction of knowledge in early childhood education

### **Theoretical framework: A Freirean perspective on participatory and transformative education**

This study is grounded in Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which advocates for education as a dialogical and problem-posing process aimed at social transformation (Freire, 1970, 1974). Freire (1974) rejected what he termed the "banking" model of education, in which learners passively receive knowledge, instead calling for conscientisation—critical awareness that enables individuals to challenge oppression and become active agents in shaping their realities. PALAR extends these principles by offering a methodological pathway to enact Freirean pedagogy in practice. Both frameworks emphasise praxis, the cyclical process of reflection and action directed toward transformation (Freire, 1970; Liu, 2013). In the context of this study, PALAR's dialogical, iterative processes enabled teachers to interrogate their pedagogical histories through memory drawings, while also engaging parents and community members in co-constructive learning. This created conditions in which participants became co-investigators rather than passive recipients, echoing Freire's vision of education as a practice of freedom (Freire & Shor, 1987).

Central to this framework, is a rejection of hierarchical knowledge structures. Freire (1974) argued that education should be a process of co-inquiry where teachers and learners engage as equals in the pursuit of knowledge. PALAR's principles of relationships, reflection, and recognition provide concrete mechanisms for realising this co-inquiry (Armstrong et al., 2022). In this study, relationships fostered trust and reciprocity, reflection facilitated deep critical interrogation of assumptions through arts-based methods, and recognition foregrounded the value of Indigenous, local, and experiential knowledge often marginalised in South African classrooms (McAteer & Wood, 2018; Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2022, 2024).

This Freirean-PALAR framework also emphasises education as a liberatory and ethical practice. Freire and Horton (1990) viewed education as a means of naming and transforming the world, while feminist participatory action research highlights relational and affective dimensions of knowledge production (Goessling, 2024). Together, these perspectives affirm the importance of solidarity, love, and care in teaching, particularly within early childhood education where trust and

belonging are foundational.

In ECD contexts shaped by socioeconomic inequalities and lingering colonial legacies, this integrated framework is especially relevant. It foregrounds community voices, challenges hierarchical models of teaching, and situates learning in lived realities and ecological contexts (Mahadew, 2023, 2025). By embedding PALAR within a Freirean paradigm, this study not only analyses, but also enacts, participatory and transformative education, positioning community gardens as pedagogical sites where knowledge is co-created, agency is nurtured, and sustainable futures are imagined.

### **Research methodology: A PALAR approach**

This study adopted a PALAR approach situated within a qualitative, participatory transformative paradigm (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Mahadew, 2025). The methodology was chosen because of its alignment with the study's aim: to disrupt traditional, teacher-centred practices in ECD and to explore how community gardens can act as participatory, contextually grounded learning spaces. PALAR's principles of relationships, reflection, and recognition were not only theoretical anchors (as depicted in the Literature Review section) but also practical guides shaping each stage of the research process.

#### **Participants and sampling**

The study involved four ECD teachers from Graslaagte Primary School, Humansdorp, Sarah Baartman District, who were purposively selected because of their active involvement in a community garden initiative linked to their centres. Parents and community members were also engaged in follow-up dialogues to provide broader perspectives, although the primary participants for data generation were the four teachers. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all individuals.

#### **Arts-based research: Memory drawings**

Arts-based methods were selected to encourage participants' self-reflection beyond verbal description (Anttila et al., 2024). Memory drawings were used as the primary tool because they allowed teachers to recall and represent formative schooling experiences visually, making visible unconscious influences on their pedagogical practices (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2020). The choice of memory drawings was guided by the need to surface embodied, emotional, and tacit dimensions of teaching that might otherwise have remained hidden in interviews alone.

#### **Data generation procedures**

Data generation took place over three workshops, each lasting approximately two hours, held in a familiar community space to ensure comfort and accessibility. The process unfolded in three phases, adapted from Crawford et al. (1992).

1. Reflection and drawing: Teachers responded to the prompt: "What can I learn from memory drawing to improve my pedagogical practices in keeping with the PALAR

paradigm?” After a short introduction to PALAR principles, participants created memory drawings and digital or AI-generated images depicting significant schooling experiences.

2. Collaborative interpretation: Participants shared their drawings in small-group dialogues, explaining images and discussing emerging meanings. These discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Facilitators prompted participants to reflect on how their drawings related to their current teaching practices.
3. Knowledge co-creation: Through facilitated group dialogue, participants collectively identified recurring themes such as hierarchical authority, isolation, and lack of community engagement. At this stage, the researchers introduced relevant theoretical concepts (e.g. Freire’s critical pedagogy, PALAR principles) to scaffold participants’ reflections, ensuring that links to broader educational theory emerged through dialogue rather than being imposed externally.

### **Data analysis**

Data consisted of participants’ memory drawings, transcripts of group discussions, and reflective field notes. Analysis followed an iterative thematic approach. First, drawings and transcripts were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns; second, themes were refined through collaborative dialogue with participants (member checking); and third, themes were interpreted in relation to the PALAR framework and Freirean pedagogy. This combination of participant-led interpretation and researcher-facilitated theorisation ensured both credibility and theoretical depth.

### **Ethical considerations**

The study adhered to principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent. Given the personal nature of memory work, participants retained the right to withhold or withdraw drawings at any stage. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and all visual data were anonymised. The participatory design also meant that participants had agency in deciding how their contributions would be represented in dissemination.

### **Findings: Re-imagining pedagogy through memory drawings**

The memory drawings provided participants with a means of critically reflecting on their educational histories, surfacing deeply ingrained experiences of traditional, teacher-centred practices. Through collaborative interpretation and thematic analysis, four key themes emerged: knowledge as teacher-owned, the classroom as an isolated space, the teacher as controller of space, and the classroom as the only place of learning. These themes illuminate how participants’ formative schooling experiences shaped their identities as educators while also pointing toward possibilities for transformation through more participatory, community-responsive pedagogies.

### Theme 1: Knowledge as teacher-owned

Participants recalled classrooms where knowledge was concentrated in the hands of the teacher. Rows of desks, silent compliance, and a focus on right or wrong answers reinforced the perception that learning was about memorisation rather than critical inquiry:

The teacher stood at the front, and we sat in rows, quietly taking notes. There was no room for questions, just answers right or wrong. It felt like there was a wall between us and the teacher.

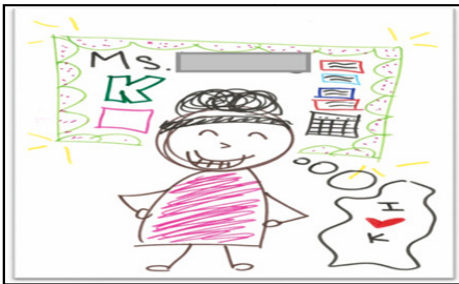
This sentiment was echoed in descriptions of a competitive culture that prized individual achievement over collaboration:

We were always competing who had the highest grades, who answered the fastest but it never felt like we were learning together.

Another participant shared Image 1 to illustrate their point about teacher-owned knowledge:

#### Image 1

Teacher-owned knowledge



Others highlighted how rote learning fostered shallow understanding:

I remember memorising entire chapters just to pass tests, but I could not tell you what any of it meant.

The metaphor of a locked treasure chest captured the exclusivity of knowledge:

It was like the teacher had this treasure chest of knowledge, and we were only allowed to peek inside when they opened it.

This dynamic discouraged curiosity and inquiry:

I stopped asking “why” early on because I realised the focus was on answers, not exploration.

Collectively, these reflections reveal how teacher-owned knowledge created a top-down pedagogy that stifled critical thinking and dialogue, leaving little room for collaborative meaning-making.

### Theme 2: The classroom as an isolated space

Another recurring theme was the sense of isolation (both physical and intellectual) produced by traditional classroom structures. Participants spoke of competitive individualism and the absence of genuine collaboration:

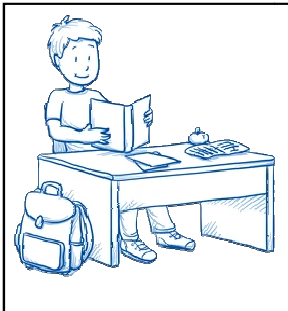
It was like we were in a bubble—what happened inside the classroom stayed there. There was no connection to what was happening outside, in our families or communities.

We didn't work together; we worked alone. Even group projects felt like individual tasks forced into a team setting.

A participant shared Image 2 to illustrate their point about the classroom as an isolated space:

**Image 2**

The classroom as an isolated space



This isolation extended to cultural and community contexts. Several participants expressed how their histories and knowledge systems were excluded:

I never saw my culture reflected in what we learned. It was like only certain histories mattered, and ours didn't.

The lack of ubuntu an ethic of shared humanity that permeates daily life in South Africa was also noted:

We were not taught to think about learning as something we do together. Ubuntu was never mentioned, even though it was such a big part of life outside school.

This disconnect from lived realities produced disengagement and detachment:

School felt like a place you went to escape real life, not understand it.

It was hard to care about what we were learning when it didn't feel like it had anything to do with who we were or where we came from.

These reflections underscore the importance of reconnecting classrooms with communities, valuing diverse knowledge systems, and dismantling barriers between formal education and everyday life.

**Theme 3: The teacher as controller of space**

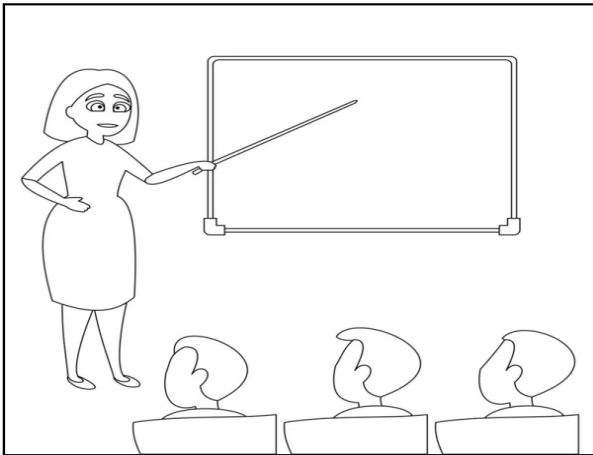
Participants consistently depicted teachers as central, authoritative figures who controlled not only the flow of knowledge but also the classroom space itself:

In my drawing, the teacher stood at the front, next to the chalkboard, like a guard at the gate of knowledge (see Image 3).

I drew the teacher bigger than everyone else, towering over us it's how it felt, like their voice was the only one that mattered.

**Image 3**

Participant's drawing of teacher as controller of space



Physical arrangements symbolised this control:

All the desks were in straight rows, facing the teacher. There was a clear line this is their space, and this is ours.

I put the teacher behind a big desk, almost like a barrier. It was a message: You can't cross this line.

The teacher as sole knowledge holder was reinforced through imagery:

In my drawing, the teacher had a book in their hand the only one in the room. It showed that they had the answers, and we were just there to listen.

Feelings of detachment and exclusion were vividly described:

I didn't draw myself at a desk. I put myself in the corner because that's how it felt like I wasn't really part of what was happening.

Some participants used symbolic imagery to capture the closed nature of the classroom:

I added walls around the teacher's desk thick, solid walls because that's how closed off it felt. There was no way in.

I drew speech bubbles coming from the teacher, but none from the students. It was one voice, all the time.

Yet, traces of resistance emerged in drawings and reflections:

I drew a window in the classroom something that looked outside. To me, that was the possibility of other knowledge, other voices trying to get in.

Even though the teacher was the focus, I sketched a small circle of kids in the back whispering to each other. That was us trying to make our own space within the rules.

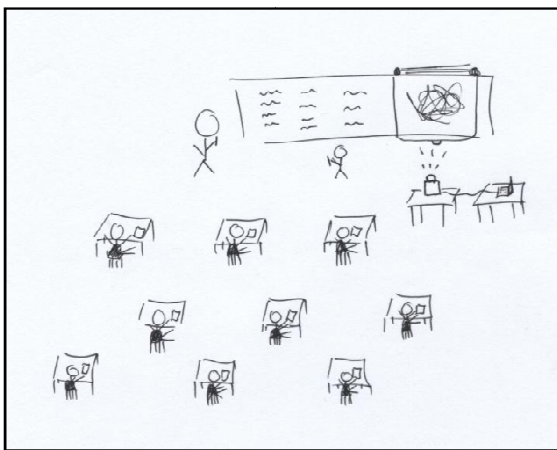
These insights reveal how the classroom was simultaneously a site of control and subtle contestation, where participants both experienced and resisted dominant pedagogical structures.

#### **Theme 4: The classroom as the only place of learning**

Finally, participants described how traditional schooling positioned the classroom as the sole, authoritative site of learning. Drawings consistently depicted rigid rows, heavy walls, and centralised authority. One participant shared a drawing (Image 4), which painted the classroom as the only place of learning:

##### **Image 4**

Participant's drawing of the classroom as the only place of learning



In my drawing, everything faced the teacher. The desks were like arrows pointing straight at them. There was nowhere else for our attention to go.

I drew walls that felt heavy and solid. It was like the room itself was telling us “this is where learning happens, and nowhere else.”

I didn't include windows or doors in my drawing because it felt like they didn't matter. Everything important was inside that room.

Authority was represented symbolically through objects and positioning:

In my drawing, the teacher stood right in front of the chalkboard, holding the only book in the room. It was a clear message the teacher had all the knowledge, and we were there to receive it.

The way the classroom was arranged made it obvious there was a right place to sit, a right way to act, and a right way to learn. It was all about following, not exploring.

This rigidity was often linked to compliance:

I drew the students like little dots identical, quiet, and all facing forward. There was no movement,

no discussion. It was all about sitting still and listening.

I made the chalkboard the biggest thing in the room. It was the source of everything we needed to know.

It felt like there was a script we all had to follow. The teacher talked, we listened, and then we repeated what they said in tests. That was it.

Some reflections highlighted how assessment reinforced this confinement:

I drew a big clock at the front of the room. It represented how everything was timed: lessons, tests, even questions. There was no space for thinking beyond what was scheduled.

I drew stacks of papers on the teacher's desk worksheets, test papers. It was all about getting the right answers, not understanding the bigger picture.

The effect was a narrow conception of education:

We were taught that learning was something formal, serious, and quiet. If it wasn't happening in that room, it didn't count.

It made me think that education was about memorising facts, not about asking questions or making connections.

This theme demonstrates how participants internalised the message that real learning could only occur within the confines of the classroom reinforcing compliance while limiting curiosity and engagement with the wider world.

### **Summary of findings**

Together, these four themes reveal the deep imprint of hierarchical and rigid pedagogies on participants' educational journeys. Memory drawings served as a powerful reflective tool, enabling participants to surface these experiences, critically interrogate their impact, and begin reimagining alternatives. While participants' past experiences reflected control, isolation, and confinement, their reflections pointed toward a desire for pedagogies grounded in dialogue, collaboration, community, and ecological connection. These insights provide a foundation for considering how community gardens, as open and participatory spaces, might disrupt entrenched models of schooling and foster more sustainable, contextually relevant approaches to ECD.

### **Discussion: Collaborative and relational learning through community gardens**

The participants' memory drawings highlighted how their schooling was shaped by rigid, hierarchical models of education that silenced curiosity, reinforced isolation, and confined learning to the four walls of the classroom. These experiences, while deeply personal, resonate with wider critiques of the banking model of education (Freire, 1970), where knowledge flows in one direction and learners are positioned as passive recipients. To move beyond these entrenched models, the study explored how community gardens could serve as dialogical and participatory spaces that challenge traditional pedagogies and reconnect ECD with lived realities.

**Breaking classroom walls: From isolation to collective learning**

Participants' accounts of isolation—"It was like we were in a bubble . . . there was no connection to our families or communities"—speak to the disconnection between formal education and children's lived worlds. Community gardens offer a counterpoint; they blur boundaries between school and community, positioning learning as a collective, relational endeavour. Unlike classrooms marked by rows of desks and silent compliance, gardens invite inquiry, experimentation, and collaboration (Shahjahan et al., 2021; Wood, 2022).

This echoes the PALAR principle of relationships, where trust and dialogue underpin knowledge co-creation (Armstrong et al., 2022). As one participant reflected, "Gardens are places where everyone teaches and everyone learns," highlighting how such spaces destabilise the notion of the teacher as sole authority. Instead, they foster horizontal knowledge sharing, aligning with Freire's call for praxis reflection and action intertwined in the pursuit of transformation (Freire, 1970).

**Reclaiming Indigenous and community knowledge**

The findings also underscored participants' sense of cultural erasure in schooling "I never saw my culture reflected in what we learned." This resonates with critiques of colonial curricula that silence local and Indigenous epistemologies (Battiste, 2013). By contrast, community gardens make visible and valuable the ecological wisdom embedded in everyday practices such as planting, harvesting, and food-sharing.

Integrating such spaces into ECD provides opportunities for intergenerational learning, where grandparents, parents, and teachers can contribute contextually relevant knowledge (McAlister et al., 2019). This connects to the PALAR principle of recognition, which values multiple ways of knowing (Kearney et al., 2013; Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2022). Gardens thus act as decolonial pedagogical spaces that centre ubuntu, the ethic of interconnected humanity, that participants longed for but rarely encountered in their early schooling.

**Education as liberation: Challenges and opportunities**

While the findings highlight possibilities for transformation, they also expose the depth of entrenched practices. Participants' drawings of teachers towering over students, and thick walls around desks illustrate not only past realities but also the cultural persistence of hierarchical models. Shifting from "the classroom as the only place of learning" to more open, participatory spaces is not without challenges. Resource constraints, overcrowded classrooms, and limited training for teachers can hinder the integration of gardens into daily practice (Mustalahti et al., 2023). Cultural differences in how learning is understood may also create tension; some parents or educators may equate structure and silence with "real education," resisting less formal, participatory approaches. Moreover, systemic pressures such as assessment standards and curriculum requirements can restrict the time and flexibility needed to sustain community garden projects.

However, acknowledging these challenges is crucial. They reflect what Freire (1970) described as

the struggle of liberation education as a contested space where structures of domination persist alongside possibilities for transformation. The value of PALAR here lies in its iterative, dialogical cycles; rather than imposing change, it facilitates collective reflection that enables participants to navigate tensions, build shared understanding, and incrementally transform practice.

### **Towards sustainable, place-responsive pedagogies**

By situating education in living, communal spaces, community gardens challenge the narrow, compliance-driven model of learning participants recalled from their own schooling. They offer an alternative vision of ECD rooted in participation, inquiry, and ecological awareness—one that connects directly to children’s lived experiences and communities.

As bell hooks (1994) reminds us, teaching is most powerful when it becomes a practice of freedom, opening spaces for critical agency, solidarity, and joy. Community gardens embody this ethos; they dismantle isolation, reclaim cultural knowledge, and cultivate ecological consciousness. Most importantly, they invite all stakeholders—teachers, children, parents, and community members—to see themselves as co-constructors of knowledge, enacting the very principles of PALAR and Freirean pedagogy.

### **Conclusion**

The participants’ memory drawings offered a vivid critique of the traditional classroom as a rigid, hierarchical space where knowledge was controlled, creativity stifled, and learning disconnected from the broader socio-cultural and ecological realities of children’s lives. Their reflections revealed the persistence of the banking model of education (Freire, 1970), where learners were positioned as passive recipients rather than active co-constructors of knowledge. This entrenched approach not only alienated learners from their lived experiences but also reinforced epistemic hierarchies that marginalised local knowledge systems and communal ways of learning.

Against this backdrop, the study demonstrates the potential of community gardens to disrupt these traditional pedagogies. As open, dialogical, and participatory spaces, gardens provide opportunities for collaborative inquiry, intergenerational knowledge-sharing, and place-based ecological learning (Kearney et al., 2013; Shahjahan et al., 2021; Wood, 2022; Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2024). Unlike classrooms defined by separation and control, gardens foster relationships, ecological awareness, and collective responsibility values that resonate with both Freirean pedagogy and the principles of PALAR. While the findings speak to the promise of gardens as alternative pedagogical sites, this interpretation draws from both participant reflections and wider scholarship rather than participants alone.

At the same time, the study acknowledges important challenges. Integrating gardens into ECD practice requires material resources, supportive leadership, and professional development for teachers—conditions that are not always present in under-resourced contexts. Cultural expectations that equate order and silence with effective teaching may also create resistance to participatory and experiential approaches. Furthermore, systemic pressures such as

assessment-driven curricula can limit the time and flexibility required to sustain such initiatives. These tensions highlight that transformation is not straightforward but must be pursued iteratively and collaboratively, consistent with PALAR's cycles of reflection and action.

This study argues that reimagining ECD through community gardens offers more than a practical intervention; it signals a broader paradigm shift. By moving beyond hierarchical models of teaching toward dialogical, community-embedded pedagogies, education can become a practice of freedom (Freire, 1970), cultivating both cognitive growth and ecological consciousness. For policymakers, this requires investment in contextually relevant, sustainable approaches that value community participation. For educators, it invites a willingness to critically reflect on their own pedagogical histories and embrace more relational, inquiry-driven practices. For researchers, it underscores the importance of participatory methodologies that not only study but also enact educational transformation. If embraced, community gardens can help reposition early childhood education as a space of liberation rather than confinement—a living pedagogy that honours children's voices, values cultural knowledge, and nurtures futures rooted in justice, sustainability, and collective care.

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# Language choice in teacher education: Why do student teachers select isiZulu first additional language?

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## Abstract

Student teachers have different reasons for choosing to teach isiZulu as a first additional language (FAL). This study found that the choice to specialise in isiZulu FAL is often a strategic decision driven by practical considerations, such as increased employment opportunities in KwaZulu-Natal, where isiZulu is a dominant language. Choosing to teach isiZulu FAL is motivated by external factors like employment prospects and extensive teaching opportunities, reflecting an awareness of the need for multilingualism in the workplace. The study used a qualitative approach to investigate the experiences of third- and fourth-year student teachers in learning to teach isiZulu FAL. The study employed human capital theory to understand students' selection of isiZulu FAL as an investment in skills that enhances their employability in a multilingual workforce (Becker, 1964). The study recommends that initial teacher education programmes acknowledge the diverse backgrounds of learners in South African classrooms and equips student teachers with the skills to adjust their teaching strategies accordingly. This involves understanding learners' backgrounds, overcoming language barriers, and fostering inclusive learning environments.

**Keywords:** first additional language, isiZulu, isiZulu first additional language, student teachers

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## Introduction and background

The Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act (Government of South Africa, 2024) is a significant piece of legislation aimed to improve the educational environment in South Africa. Its primary emphasis is to enhance the value of African languages within the school curriculum, which is crucial for fostering a sense of cultural identity and heritage among learners (Cindi, 2021). The Act seeks to ensure that all learners, from Grade 1 to Grade 12, have the opportunity to learn and use African languages. This is intended to help learners connect with their cultural roots and promote a sense of belonging. Currently, learners are required to learn only one first additional language (FAL), however, the BELA Act proposes that schools offer a multilingual language that would allow for a more diverse linguistic experience. This change is expected to enrich the educational environment and provide learners with greater language skills. The Act emphasises the inclusion of all nine African languages: isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, siSwati, Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi, Xitsonga, and Tshivenda. By stimulating the learning of African languages (in this study, isiZulu) the BELA Act aims to foster social cohesion among different cultural groups in South Africa. It encourages understanding and respect for diverse languages and cultures, which is essential for building a united society. By prioritising isiZulu as a FAL, the education system adopts an alternative approach to promoting multilingualism and enhancing the value of African languages, thereby bridging communication gaps, fostering mutual understanding among diverse communities, and addressing historical inequalities in language education (Ntshangase & Bosch, 2020).

The teaching profession is currently facing a significant supply–demand challenge, with an increasing number of graduates struggling to secure employment due to an oversaturated job market (Wang, 2024). While the demand for teachers fluctuates based on subject specialisation, geographic location, and policy changes, many aspiring educators find themselves in fields with limited job prospects. This situation necessitates a strategic approach when selecting teaching specialisations, ensuring alignment with market demands to enhance employability. Prospective teachers must make informed choices by considering areas where shortages exist, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics subjects, Indigenous languages, and special education, to maximise their chances of securing stable employment (Rudolph et al., 2024). This enables future educators to position themselves advantageously within the competitive landscape of the teaching profession.

This study draws on the main findings of first author’s previous research (Thusi, 2024), which aimed to investigate the factors influencing student teachers’ decisions to specialise in isiZulu FAL, including perceived employment advantages and the prominence of isiZulu as the primary language of communication in schools across KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). Msila (2021) explained that student teachers viewed the Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme as a solution to financial barriers, fostering appreciation for the teacher programme because it guarantees permanent employment upon degree completion. Furthermore, the authors emphasised that student teachers preferred to

teach the isiZulu language at their future schools because they were inspired by their former language teachers. These language teachers, particularly Indigenous language teachers, served as role models and instilled pride in future teachers, ensuring the preservation and continuity of the isiZulu language. This means that some of the preferences of student teachers are not only about gaining employment, but also reflect a deeper commitment to cultural preservation, language revitalisation, and the desire to inspire future generations through Indigenous language teaching. This study explores the student teachers' preference for specialising in the isiZulu language in KZN. In doing so, it will first review the literature, conceptually, as to why the teachers chose to teach isiZulu, and present the findings.

## **Literature review**

### **The BELA Act on language policy**

The BELA Act of 2024 grants the head of a provincial department of basic education the authority to determine a public school's language policy, while also requiring schools to admit learners from outside their designated catchment areas if space permits (Republic of South Africa, 2024). While these measures aim to promote inclusivity and equity, they have raised concerns that centralising such decisions could infringe on learners' constitutional right to education in their preferred language, and marginalise Indigenous languages in favour of more dominant languages (Democratic Alliance, 2024; Sayedayn, 2021).

Moreover, BELA has significant implications for student teachers' career choices. The centralisation of language and admission policies may influence student teachers to select teaching specialisations aligned with departmental priorities rather than personal or community preferences (Rudolph et al., 2024). As a result, fewer prospective teachers may opt to specialise in Indigenous languages, perceiving limited autonomy or opportunities in schools where dominant languages are prioritised. Thus, this dynamic could negatively affect both the preservation of Indigenous languages and the equitable distribution of teaching expertise across South Africa's schools (Sayedayn, 2021).

BELA could also significantly influence student teachers in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes in several ways. One of the primary provisions of the Act is the emphasis on multilingualism in schools (Mohohlwane, 2020). Consequently, teacher education programmes may need to adapt their curricula to place greater focus on language specialisations, particularly African languages. Furthermore, for student teachers, this policy shift implies that choosing specialisations in languages such as isiZulu and other Indigenous African languages could become increasingly strategic given the national push for bilingual and multilingual teaching practices. Student teachers specialising in isiZulu, for example, may find enhanced employment opportunities in schools, including former Model C schools, where there is a shortage of African language teachers. Therefore, BELA not only shapes the academic preparation and specialisation choices of student teachers but also has broader implications for promoting multilingualism, preserving Indigenous languages, and ensuring equitable distribution of teaching expertise across

the country (Rudolph et al., 2024; Sayedayn, 2021).

### **Supply and demand of teachers in KZN**

KZN has a substantial pool of unemployed teacher graduates, with approximately 25,566 individuals available for employment. Despite this surplus, there are about 3,720 vacant teacher posts in the province (van der Merwe, 2023). The shortage of teaching posts in KZN despite a surplus of teacher graduates is primarily due to budgetary and structural constraints, which limit the number of funded positions available (Spaull, 2013). Additionally, there is a mismatch between graduate specialisations and the subjects or locations of vacant posts, leaving many qualified teachers without suitable opportunities (Fleisch, 2008). This combination of limited funding, post-allocation inefficiencies, and geographic disparities creates high competition for jobs, and delays entry into the profession for newly qualified teachers (Boakye & Ampiah, 2017). The discrepancy highlights inefficiencies in the hiring process and recruitment of teachers within the province. This shortage disrupts learning, leading to protests and school closures. Budget cuts have exacerbated the situation, putting up to 19,000 teaching jobs at risk due to financial constraints (van der Merwe, 2023), which not only affects current positions but also limits the ability to fill existing vacancies.

The BELA Act could exacerbate teacher supply and demand issues by influencing the specialisations that ITE students choose, potentially narrowing the pool of qualified teachers in certain subject areas. For instance, if more students opt for specialised fields like inclusive education or languages, there may be fewer graduates available to fill vacancies in subjects with already chronic shortages, such as mathematics, science, or technical education (Smith & White, 2024). This mismatch between the supply of teachers in certain specialisations, and the demand for teachers in others, could deepen existing gaps in the education system. Literature on teacher employment highlights the challenges the Department of Basic Education faces in addressing teacher shortages. A study by van der Berg et al. (2020) found that, while the supply of new teachers has increased, many newly qualified ITE graduates struggle to find employment, particularly in rural areas or in specialised subject fields. ITE graduates also report feeling inadequately prepared for the practical challenges of teaching, and they cite issues such as overcrowded classrooms and limited resources as significant barriers to effective teaching (South African Council for Educators, 2020). This suggests that while there is a push for specialisation and professionalisation, the employment landscape for new teachers remains complex and influenced by both policy and the practical realities of the education system.

### **Challenges of employment opportunities for newly qualified teachers**

Newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in South Africa face significant challenges in entering the teaching profession. The application process requires NQTs to be included in a centralised database, where their qualifications, teaching specialisation, and preferred locations are recorded (Fleming, 2024). When vacancies arise, school principals access this database to shortlist candidates, often favouring experienced teachers or those with personal connections, which limits

opportunities for many NQTs (Kapp et al., 2022). Furthermore, many NQTs are offered short-term contracts rather than permanent posts, creating instability and stress. Low salaries for temporary positions, sometimes as low as R4,000 per month, further discourage young teachers and make it difficult to sustain themselves financially (University of Cape Town, n.d.). This is usually the case if they are employed by the school governing body. In addition, limited mentorship and induction programmes leave NQTs feeling overwhelmed as they face full teaching loads and administrative responsibilities similar to those of experienced teachers, increasing the risk of stress and burnout (Kvam et al., 2024).

The employment landscape for NQTs is also shaped by the broader dynamics of supply and demand, which affect job security and career progression. Although there is a substantial pool of qualified teacher graduates in South Africa, vacancies are limited, and permanent positions offering long-term job security are scarce (Collins, 2024; Shava, 2020). Contract positions, while providing schools with hiring flexibility, create uncertainty for teachers given that contracts may be renewed, converted into permanent posts, or reopened to new applicants, requiring teachers to reapply (Fleming, 2024). This casualisation of teaching posts, combined with high competition, low initial salaries, and insufficient professional support, contributes to high attrition rates among NQTs, further exacerbating teacher shortages in the system (University of Cape Town, n.d.).

### **Theoretical and conceptual perspectives on student teachers' preference for isiZulu**

This study employed human capital theory (HTC), first developed by Becker (1964) and later expanded by Blundell et al. (1999), and argues that investment in education and skills development enhances productivity, employability, and economic outcomes. From this perspective, specialised training increases an individual's value in the labour market (Tan, 2014). Within the context of this study, HTC provides a useful framework for understanding why student teachers strategically select isiZulu FAL as a specialisation. Given the supply–demand dynamics in the teaching profession, isiZulu FAL is viewed as a form of human capital investment, particularly in light of policy-driven opportunities such as those policies created by the BELA Act, which has amplified the need for Indigenous language educators (Zikhali, 2016). This theoretical perspective explains how deliberate choices in language specialisation can enhance employability, job security, and long-term career development in South Africa's education system.

Beyond employability, student teachers' preference for isiZulu FAL is strongly connected to issues of cultural identity, decolonisation, and transformation in higher education. IsiZulu, as one of the most widely spoken languages in South Africa, allows students to connect with their heritage while contributing to the preservation and promotion of Indigenous languages in education (Universities South Africa, 2022). This resonates with the calls for decolonisation championed by the 2015/2016 #FeesMustFall movement, which sought to challenge Eurocentric curricula and reclaim Indigenous knowledge systems (Moyo, 2024). Teaching isiZulu thus becomes both an act of cultural affirmation and a step toward transforming education because language functions as a vehicle of culture, identity, and knowledge transmission (Sefa Dei & Cacciavillani, 2024). Institutions such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal have responded to this

call by elevating isiZulu to near parity with English in teaching and learning, signalling broader systemic change (Universities South Africa, 2022).

Specialisation in isiZulu FAL is also motivated by the academic advantages of teaching and learning in one's mother tongue. Research has shown that using one's mother tongue in education can improve academic performance. In the South African context, Dukhan et al. (2016) demonstrated that first-language speakers produced better-structured notes and achieved stronger results in their first-year studies compared to second-language speakers, highlighting how mother-tongue use supports comprehension and academic success. Similarly, Malindi et al. (2023) found that mother-tongue-based bilingual education in mathematics enabled learners to grasp concepts more effectively and think critically, reinforcing the role of Indigenous languages in enhancing subject-specific performance. Similarly, Seid (2017) found that Ethiopian learners who received early education in their mother tongue achieved significantly higher outcomes in both literacy and mathematics, even after transitioning to English instruction, highlighting the long-term cognitive and academic benefits of mother-tongue-based education. A practical example is provided by Mawethu Jauza, a Pinetown Boys High School educator and UKZN doctoral candidate, who credited his mother tongue for enabling both academic success and deeper intellectual engagement; conducting research in isiZulu from honours to doctoral level gave him a clear advantage in mastering content and expressing ideas fully (Universities South Africa, 2022). Nevertheless, persistent challenges remain, particularly the shortage of isiZulu academic resources and the slow development of specialised terminology. These gaps highlight the need for continued investment in isiZulu scholarship to strengthen its role as both an academic and instructional language.

HCT explains the economic logic of language specialisation but has limitations. Its market-oriented view frames education mainly as individual investment (Marginson, 2019). It overlooks cultural, symbolic, and identity factors that shape choices—especially within historical and social contexts (Jensen, 2010). This creates tension between individual economic gain and collective commitments to cultural preservation, decolonisation, and social transformation, making isiZulu FAL specialisation more than just a matter of employability.

### **Research design and methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research design within a case study of a private higher education institution offering a Bachelor of Education degree. The focus was on final-year students who had specialised in isiZulu FAL. The qualitative orientation was appropriate because it allowed for the exploration of subjective perceptions, meanings, and interpretations that participants attached to their experiences (Lim, 2024). By employing qualitative methods, the researcher was able to gather rich, detailed, and contextually grounded data from participants situated within their specific educational and social setting (Yin, 2018).

The case study methodology enabled an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of student

teachers learning to teach isiZulu FAL within ITE programmes (Creswell, 2024). This approach provided insights into the daily realities, challenges, and perspectives of student teachers and situated their narratives within broader institutional and policy contexts. The study was framed within an interpretive paradigm, which seeks to understand how participants construct meaning through practice, interaction, and communication (Tracy, 2019). Through this lens, the study examined how student teachers understood and made sense of learning to teach isiZulu FAL.

Ten Bachelor of Education student teachers were purposively selected to participate (Neuman, 2014). Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit in-depth narratives, guided by open-ended questions that allowed participants to articulate their perspectives fully (Roulston & Choi, 2018). The purposive sampling strategy ensured access to participants with relevant experiences and knowledge, enabling a thorough exploration of the phenomena under study (Neuman, 2014). In line with Ramrathan (2017), participants were chosen because they were able to provide meaningful accounts of their lived experiences. The following criteria guided their selection: students with isiZulu as a mother tongue, students without isiZulu as a mother tongue and unable to speak it, multilingual students, and students who had completed supervised teaching practice in their second year.

The data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. This method is well-suited to qualitative research because it balances a flexible structure with opportunities for probing and follow-up (Roulston & Choi, 2018). The interviews were framed by open-ended questions that encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences of learning to teach isiZulu FAL, while also allowing the researcher to explore their responses in greater depth. This approach facilitated the emergence of unanticipated themes and meanings, thereby enriching the overall data set. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and analysed using a systematic coding and thematic analysis process (Nowell et al., 2017). Open coding was employed to identify significant statements, concepts, and patterns related to participants' experiences and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These codes were then grouped into categories and refined into core themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This process facilitated a rich, contextually grounded interpretation of student teachers' experiences of learning to teach isiZulu FAL (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017).

## **Presentation of findings**

Data analysis yielded the three main themes: isiZulu FAL preference for opportunities and decolonising the curricula, balancing teacher supply and demand with learner enrolment in KZN, and challenges for NQTs.

### **IsiZulu FAL preference for opportunities and decolonising the curricula**

Student teachers selected IsiZulu FAL as their specialisation primarily due to employment opportunities and the dominance of isiZulu in KZN schools. One of the participants revealed that the choice of learning isiZulu was a strategic choice for job opportunities:

I am learning isiZulu FAL by choice, I would choose Afrikaans but I am a student teacher at KZN University, also residing in KZN, it is definitely useful to learn isiZulu because I am not sure where I will get employment. (Phil)

On the same vein, another participant noted:

*IsiZulu ngoba kufanele ngibe nolwazi lwalokho okumele kufundiswe, njengokusetshenziswa kolimi, ukuphimisela amagama ngendlela efanele, namakhono okubhala anele, okuhlanganisa i-creative writing, lesson planning kanye noku assessa on creating learners' activities [I learned isiZulu because I must have the knowledge of what must be taught like language usage, proper pronunciation of words, and adequate writing skills, including creative writing, lesson planning, assess on creating learners' activities]. (Beli)*

According to Sokani (2024), isiZulu is one of the most widely spoken languages in South Africa, making it a strategic choice for aspiring teachers. The preference for isiZulu FAL also aligns with efforts to decolonise the curriculum, given that promoting Indigenous languages strengthens cultural identity and challenges the dominance of colonial languages in education (Nomlomo, 2019). The participants in this study expressed that teaching isiZulu FAL allows them to preserve and promote the language, ensuring its continued relevance in the education system (Msila, 2021). However, challenges remain in fully integrating isiZulu FAL into mainstream education, particularly in schools that still prioritise English as the primary medium of instruction (Ntshangase, 2023). According to Beli, the acquisition of isiZulu as an academic discipline was motivated by the necessity (policy requirement) to acquire comprehensive disciplinary knowledge of the academic subject that a student teacher wants to specialise in. This highlights the need for better workforce planning and policy interventions to ensure an adequate supply of isiZulu FAL teachers.

### **Balancing teacher supply and demand with learner enrolment in KZN**

The findings reveal a growing demand for isiZulu FAL teachers in KZN, largely due to the high number of isiZulu-speaking learners and the increasing recognition of Indigenous languages in the curriculum (Gumbi, 2019; Thusi, 2024). However, the supply of qualified teachers has not kept pace, leading to staff shortages, inconsistent placements, and challenges with permanent employment opportunities (Msila, 2021). The student teachers provide insight into how this imbalance is experienced at school level.

During my teaching practice, I saw that almost every learner speaks isiZulu at home, yet the school did not have enough isiZulu FAL teachers. This made it difficult for learners to get enough attention and proper support. (Beli)

I noticed that schools want isiZulu FAL teachers, but sometimes they use teachers from other learning areas to fill the gap. This reduces the quality of teaching because those teachers are not trained in isiZulu methodology. (Queen)

I feel motivated because there is a demand for isiZulu teachers, but at the same time, I am uncertain about job security since some schools rely on temporary contracts. (Sneh)

When I spoke to other student teachers, we all agreed that policies about teacher posts are not always clear. Even though the demand is there, we face challenges with the Department of Education's delays and budget constraints. (Phil)

The students' voices reveal two intertwined dimensions of balancing teacher supply with learner enrolment: opportunities and challenges. On the other hand, the demand for isiZulu FAL teachers offers hope for future employment as schools increasingly recognise the importance of mother-tongue and additional language teaching, demonstrating the potential for isiZulu educators to play a central role in addressing multilingual education needs and sustaining Indigenous languages in schools (Gumbi, 2019; Thusi, 2024). On the other hand, the findings also reveal structural challenges that hinder progress including administrative delays in placements, policy inconsistencies, reliance on unqualified staff to fill vacancies, and job insecurity due to temporary contracts. Such barriers suggest that while demand exists, systemic inefficiencies prevent the effective matching of trained teachers with learner needs (Msila, 2021; Sokani, 2020). Therefore, balancing supply with enrolment in KZN requires not only producing more isiZulu FAL teachers but also reforming administrative and policy frameworks to ensure equitable and sustainable staffing solutions.

### Challenges for NQTs

NQTs encounter several challenges in transitioning from training to full-time teaching. One of the primary difficulties is classroom management as they struggle to maintain discipline while implementing effective teaching strategies (Nduduzo & Thabisile, 2025). Some of the student teachers maintained the challenges they faced in managing the classes:

*Kwakungelula ukumeneja I class ilapho ngangenza khona i-TP yami ngoba ikilasi lalilikhulu kakhulu. Lapho behlukaniswa abafundi ngamaqembu noma ngababili kuzoba nomsindo ekilasini futhi isifundo kwakufanele siphindwe ngosuku olulandelayo [It was impossible to manage the class where I was doing my TP because the class was too big. When dividing learners into groups or in pairs there would be noise in class and the lesson was to be repeated on a next day]. (Nompoti)*

We were taught various methods and techniques to manage learners, such as using group work, rewards, and changing activities when learners lose focus. But when I tried these strategies in practice, they did not work as expected. The class was overcrowded, the resources were limited, and the learners were still disruptive. I felt frustrated because what I had learned in theory did not match the reality of the classroom. (Sneh)

The student teachers' views emphasised the struggle with classroom management despite their academic preparation. While some challenges stem from learner behaviour and the difficulty of asserting authority, others are linked to the mismatch between theoretical knowledge and practical realities, as Sneh explained. The inability to apply university-taught techniques effectively illustrates a gap between pre-service training and the contextual demands of schools such as overcrowding and limited resources. This echoes earlier findings that NQTs frequently encounter structural and contextual barriers that hinder the implementation of pedagogical strategies (Saleem et al., 2021). Without bridging this gap through stronger mentorship and more practice-based

preparation, the challenges observed during teaching practice may persist into the early years of professional teaching, affecting both teacher confidence and learner outcomes (Nduduzo & Thabisile, 2025). Additionally, many NQTs find it difficult to design lesson plans that align with the isiZulu FAL CAPS document, which prescribes both content and teaching methodologies (Sokani, 2024).

*Ngesikhathi ngilungiselela u lesson plan wesiZulu FAL, ngabona ukuthi kwakungelula ukulandela umqulu weCAPS. Ngoba yona isitshela ukuthi yikuphi okufanele sikufundise kanye nezindlela, zakhona kodwa ngezinye izikhathi ekilasini abafundi babengenzi ngendlela iCAPS esho ngayo Ngazithola ngibambekile ngoba ngangifuna ukuba nobuciko, kodwa futhi ngangikhathazekile ngokuthi kungenzeka ngingahlangabezani nezidingo [ When I was preparing the isiZulu FAL lesson plan, I realised that it was not easy to follow the CAPS document. Because it tells us what to teach and how to teach it, but sometimes in class, the learners did not do it the way CAPS said. I found myself stuck because I wanted to be creative, but I was also worried that I might not meet the requirements]. (Nik)*

At my school, ICT resources were scarce, so I had to fall back on chalk and board. Including learners with barriers was also difficult because I lacked enough strategies. (Beli)

Another challenge is the lack of resources and technological integration because some schools have limited ICT infrastructure, making it hard for teachers to adopt modern teaching methods (Gumbi, 2019). Furthermore, inclusive education remains a significant concern because NQTs often feel unprepared to teach in diverse classrooms with learners of varying abilities and backgrounds (Shulman, 1986). This suggests a need for enhanced teacher training programmes that focus on practical classroom experience, inclusive teaching strategies, and ICT integration.

These findings highlight the growing importance of isiZulu FAL in South African education, particularly in KZN. While student teachers see opportunities in teaching isiZulu FAL, challenges such as resource limitations, policy inconsistencies, and the preparedness of NQTs must be addressed. Future research should explore ways to strengthen teacher training programmes and improve support structures for NQTs to ensure effective isiZulu FAL teaching and learning.

The findings highlight the need for a more consistent approach to policy implementation, better resource allocation, and improved teacher preparation. From the perspective of HCT, the development of an educated and skilled workforce is critical for the economic and social progress of a nation. Investing in the professional development of teachers, particularly in specialised areas like isiZulu FAL, is essential to enhance the overall quality of education and ensure equitable opportunities for all learners. By addressing resource limitations, policy inconsistencies, and the preparedness of NQTs, the education system can strengthen its human capital base. This, in turn, will contribute to the broader goal of improving language proficiency and educational outcomes, ultimately benefiting society as a whole.

## **Recommendation**

This study contributes to understanding why student teachers choose to specialise in isiZulu FAL, and how this specialisation influences both their professional preparedness and learner outcomes. It shows that many student teachers are motivated not only by employment opportunities but also by a desire to preserve and promote their language and culture. Teaching in isiZulu also supports learners' academic performance by helping them grasp complex concepts and express themselves more effectively. Based on these findings, it is recommended that ITE programmes provide practical workshops on lesson design, inclusive teaching strategies, and ICT integration, while fostering awareness of the cultural and educational value of isiZulu. In doing so, student teachers can be equipped to meet professional demands and, at the same time, serve as custodians of Indigenous knowledge, sustaining the isiZulu language for future generations.

## **Conclusion**

In the current context of high levels of unemployed teacher graduates, strategic decision-making is essential to enhance employability and career stability. The oversupply of educators in certain subjects has created a highly competitive job market, making it crucial for prospective teachers to carefully select specialisations that align with areas of high demand. Subjects such as Indigenous languages, specifically isiZulu in this research, have greater employment opportunities in KZN. Additionally, financial support programmes like the Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme prioritise funding for high-demand teaching areas, reinforcing the importance of making informed choices. By strategically selecting their teaching specialisation based on market trends, policy shifts, and regional needs, future educators can improve their chances of securing permanent employment while contributing meaningfully to the evolving educational landscape.

Student teachers believed that choosing a teaching specialisation in high-demand subjects would increase their chances of securing employment after completing their Bachelor of Education programme. They recognised that isiZulu as a FAL is a strategic choice, particularly in KZN, where it is widely spoken and essential for communication in schools. The demand for isiZulu FAL teachers is growing due to policies like the BELA Act, which promotes African languages in the curriculum, creating more teaching opportunities. Additionally, funding opportunities like the Funza Lushaka Bursary prioritise Indigenous language teaching specialisations, offering financial support and a clearer pathway to permanent employment.

This study explores the student teachers' preference for specialising in isiZulu in KZN. It was found that student teachers in the Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme see it as a solution to financial barriers, and to ensure permanent employment upon degree completion. They prefer teaching the isiZulu language due to inspiration from former teachers, who serve as role models and instil pride in future teachers, ensuring the legacy of the language. The study employed HCT because it views education as an investment in skills that enhance economic productivity. Teachers may specialise in isiZulu due to the increasing demand for multilingual educators in South Africa's diverse

linguistic landscape. The study recommends that there should be workshops to empower students.

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# Teacher perceptions regarding the abolishment of corporal punishment in selected schools in Tshwane North District in South Africa

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## Abstract

This article investigates teacher perceptions about banning corporal punishment. To probe teacher perceptions about beliefs surrounding the abolishment of corporal punishment, a questionnaire was used to collect data via a simple random sample of selected schools in Tshwane North District and analysed via SPSS 30.0. Teachers (n = 280) were mainly members of the school management teams, involving five public secondary township schools, and five secondary city schools. The most relevant finding was that perceptions around the paradoxical advantages of abolishing corporal punishment as outcome factor were directly influenced by perceptions about obedience, and indirectly influenced by perceived threats posed by the abolishment of corporal punishment as mediating factor. These factors are causally interrelated and embedded in the mental models associated with the cultural environment, and changing such predominant mental models and perceptions will not be accomplished by legislation alone. Prevalent mental models must be brought to the surface where the assumptions on which such models are formed can be openly discussed via dialogue with others and critical self-reflection. Any important decisions impacting teaching practices must include teachers, because they are the ones who must implement those practices that affect them.

**Keywords:** corporal punishment, discipline, mediation, mental models, school management

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## Background to the problem

After the promulgation of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996a), learners became more aware of their human rights (van Wyk & Pelsler, 2014). Among other things, corporal punishment was abolished. In the view of those authors, this made school management apprehensive because they saw the new official stipulations as a matter of sparing the rod and spoiling the learner. While schools' management searched for alternative methods of disciplining learners, respect for them began to dwindle. School leadership, likewise, had been having difficulties coping with learners' misconduct in secondary schools. For example, Mahamba (2019) stressed the point that learners did not listen, carried dangerous weapons, reported late to school, drank alcohol, used drugs at school, and had no respect for authority whatsoever. Classroom disruptions, rowdiness, disrespect, and the use of prohibited devices are just a few of the issues that have escalated in secondary schools.

Corporal punishment of children is a violation of human rights. It contravenes international instruments that prohibit the use of cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment (Organization of African Unity, 1981, 1990; United Nations, 1989; United Nations General Assembly, 1948, 1966), Corporal punishment also violates children's rights to education (Department of Basic Education, 2017).

Morrell (2001) wrote that the introduction of apartheid, and Bantu Education in the 1950s in South Africa, provided for compulsory education for Black learners; the system was highly authoritarian or controlling. Furthermore, Kubeka (2004) argued that corporal punishment was rapid and simple to administer while other methods required large amounts of time, patience, and skill. In addition, all schools have a National Curriculum that must be followed and completed within the school year, so teaching time is limited and dealing with disciplinary problems would use up valuable teaching time. Hence, corporal punishment became the predominant way of maintaining discipline in many schools.

Using corporal punishment in South African schools, prior to 1996 as a means of exacting obedience became a deeply ingrained internal mental image of how the world works (Senge, 1990). Senge (1990, p. 174) further wrote that these mental images limit one to familiar ways of thinking; they are our mental models of "how the world works," and they shape how we behave. Hofstede (1991) referred to mental models as one's mental programmes, which lie within the social environments in which one grew up and collected during one's life experiences. Furthermore, Hofstede (1991) indicated that this mental programming starts within the family and continues in the school and the community in which one lives. More imperative, to Senge (1990, p. 175) is that these "mental models [also] shape our perceptions" of what we see. For example, the traditional way of enforcing discipline in South Africa was to instil obedience by using fear of punishment such as corporal punishment so that the perceived unethical behaviour would be eliminated.

In 1996 when the democratic dispensation was introduced, the new Constitution (RSA, 1996)

became the highest law in the country and conduct had to be in accordance with the values in it. One of those values was that human dignity, the achievement of equality, and the advancement of human rights and freedom must be prominent in all structures of governance. Besides the Constitution, the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996d, p. 6) mandated that the administering of corporal punishment is banned in South Africa, stipulating that “no person may administer corporal punishment at a school to a learner [and that] any person who contravenes subsection (1) is guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to a sentence which could be imposed for assault.” That Act thus made it clear that corporal punishment may no longer be used in schools as a means of punishment. The Employment of Educators Act (RSA, 1996b) also clearly stipulates that teachers (school management) must be dismissed if they commit an offence such as harassment of a learner. Prohibition is also included in the National Education Policy Act (RSA, 1996c) and the Further Education and Training Colleges Act (RSA, 2006). In 2000, the Constitutional Court dismissed a bid by 196 Christian schools to make an exception to the prohibition on grounds of religious conviction. In 2024, while reporting to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Government stated that it had trained 141 schools on “alternatives to corporal punishment” in 2023 (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024, para. 33).

Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2023) noted that although the Abolishment of Corporal Punishment Act (No. 33 of 1997 banned the use of corporal punishment in schools, the practice continues as a form of discipline more than 20 years later:

Of those that reported experiencing violence at school, the most common form of violence experienced was corporal punishment by teachers. . . . In 2019, just over 1 million out of 13 million school-going children aged 5–17 years reported that they had experienced some form of violence. Of those who experienced violence at school, close to 84% experienced corporal punishment by teachers, followed by verbal abuse by teachers (13,7%) and physical violence by teachers (10,6%). Between 2009 and 2019, the percentage of children who experienced verbal abuse by other learners increased by six percentage points from 18,1% in 2009 to 24,1% in 2019. (Stats SA, 2023, para. 2)

Violent disciplinary methods were used more on females than males. In 2009, close to 90% of females were subjected to corporal punishment by teachers. By 2019, this figure reduced to 85,5%. Similarly, the percentage of males who experienced corporal punishment reduced to 82,3% in 2019 from 87,3 % in 2009. (Stats SA, 2023, para. 4)

In 2009, both genders’ experience of physical abuse by teachers were close to 5%. This percentage declined to 3,2% for males in 2019 but remained unchanged for females. On the other hand, more males were victims of verbal abuse by teachers in 2019 (5,6%) compared to females (4,4%). Females also experienced more verbal abuse by peers in 2019 compared to males (14,3% and 13% respectively). However, the reverse was observed with regards to physical abuse by another learner where more males (11,9%) experienced more abuse. (Stats SA, 2023, para. 5)

While schools are expected to provide a safe and nurturing environment for children to fully benefit from educational opportunities, teachers and peers are the source of a fearful learning environment in South Africa. (Stats SA, 2023, para. 6)

Since 1996, newspapers have routinely reported that corporal punishment continues to be applied

in secondary schools, sometimes, resulting in hospitalisation. In rare cases, schools' management have been charged, in terms of the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996d), but few have received more than a rap over the knuckles. Throughout the education system, there has been an apparent reluctance to prosecute management, and it was only late in 2000 that the National Department of Education (2000) moved beyond public condemnation of managements, who continued to use corporal punishment, to elaborate on alternatives.

Studies presented in a report by the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children (GIEACPC, 2017) indicated that in Botswana, 92% of learners were beaten in school. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2024, p. 6) reported the concern of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities about:

The high number of reported cases of corporal punishment, violence, abuse, neglect and inequality involving children with disabilities, especially autistic children and children with psychosocial and/or intellectual disabilities, by teachers and peers.

The Committee is further concerned about reported cases of abuse of children with disabilities at schools and school hostels, with teachers allegedly being the perpetrators in most cases. The Committee recommends that the State party; in line with target 16.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals, develop, adopt and implement legislation and concrete measures to ensure that children with disabilities, including autistic children, those with albinism and children with psychosocial and/or intellectual disabilities, are adequately protected from violence, abuse, comprising corporal punishment, and that sanctions are imposed against perpetrators; and that the Children's Act is amended without delay to explicitly prohibit all forms of corporal punishment in all settings [and] adopt a time-bound plan of action to address the high levels of physical, sexual, verbal and emotional abuse in special education schools, including special education school hostels. This plan must include a monitoring framework and process with a comprehensive vetting procedure, including for criminal records, for all teachers and officials working with children before recruitment, and ensure that the National Sexual Offenders Register and National Child Protection Register be adequately maintained.

The above studies clearly demonstrate that legislation alone will not remove beliefs and predominant mental models about discipline. This study investigated teacher perceptions around the abolishment of corporal punishment as mode for maintaining discipline in public schools and finding reasons for the resistance to abandoning corporal punishment. Having provided a brief background for the problem that this research is attempting to solve, some concepts associated with the problem will be placed in context.

## **Corporal punishment**

In the literature, corporal punishment has been described as follows:

Any physical action that hurts a learner in the name of discipline. This could mean hitting, slapping, pinching, pushing, and kicking; depriving the learner of food, or rest, or movement; forcing chillies, washing-up-liquid, or irritating substances into a learner's mouth, or anywhere on the body; and/or forcing them (learners) to sit or stand for any length of time (Childline South Africa, n.d., p. 1).

The Basic Education Laws Amendment Act (RSA, 2024) defined corporal punishment as any deliberate act against a child that inflicts pain or physical discomfort, however light, to punish or contain the child, which includes, but is not limited to, hitting, smacking, slapping, pinching or scratching with the hand or any object; kicking, shaking, throwing, throwing objects at, burning, scalding, biting, pulling hair, boxing ears, pulling or pushing children; forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, forced ingestion, washing children's mouths out with soap, denying meals, heat and shelter, forcing a child to do exercises which are not in accordance with the curriculum applicable to the learner or denying or restricting a child's use of the toilet; and, any acts which seek to belittle, humiliate, threaten, induce fear or ridicule the dignity and person of a learner. Another view was given by Gershoff (2002) who suggested that behaviours that do not result in significant physical injury are considered corporal punishment, whereas behaviours that risk injury are considered physical abuse. In addition, Gershoff et al. (2015) described corporal punishment as the use of physical force to inflict suffering on a perpetrator with the goal of correcting or preventing the perpetrator from repeating an unpleasant behaviour. Further problems are that the frequency and severity of corporal punishment is inconsistently demarcated and measured, and these vary from culture to culture, nation to nation, and situation to situation.

The Bible, however, sanctions corporal punishment, and religious teachings approve the threat and use of force as a proper method for disciplining learners; they are punitive. Sayings ascribed to King Solomon can be interpreted as giving adults or schools' management permission to use extreme disciplinary measures, when learners were disobedient. Relevant verses state specifically to "not spare the rod," which is literally interpreted to mean beating the child with a stick.

Lombardo and Polonko (2005, p. 195) stated that seen from a colonial perspective, corporal punishment was "one of unequal power comprised of dominance/subservience" and that the period of colonialism advocated the use of corporal punishment for disobedience. From a children's-rights perspective, is the matter of learners' and adolescents' contributions to the development of society, as well as of adults' or school managements' will and ability to protect learners. The two perspectives provided reveal a wide difference of opinion on the status of learners and how to maintain discipline.

An example of a children's rights is provided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) which protects the rights of children by providing comprehensive minimum standards that recognise and protect the dignity of all children (Shmueli, 2008). Children's rights are formulated along human rights, but they specifically address children's special needs to ensure their well-being and development (UNICEF, 2005). Corporal punishment is the most common form of violence against children worldwide. It includes any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light, as well as non-physical forms of punishment that are cruel and degrading. Any corporal punishment violates children's right to respect for their human dignity and physical integrity, and their rights to health, development, education and freedom from torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. It is illegal in the majority of states—unlike other forms of interpersonal

violence—because it violates their right to equal protection under the law (GIEACPC, 2018). The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2007) defined corporal or physical punishment as any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involves hitting (smacking, slapping, spanking) children, with the hand or with an implement—a whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, and so forth. But it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, biting, pulling hair or boxing ears, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, burning, scalding or forced ingestion (for example, washing children’s mouths out with soap or forcing them to swallow hot spices). In the view of the Committee, corporal punishment is invariably degrading. In addition, there are other non-physical forms of punishment that are also cruel and degrading and thus incompatible with the Convention. These include, for example, punishment which belittles, humiliates, denigrates, scapegoats, threatens, scares or ridicules the child.

Some countries and states have specific definitions of corporal punishment. For instance, the Texas Education Code defined corporal punishment as “the deliberate inflicting of physical pain by hitting, paddling, spanking, slapping, or any other physical force employed as a means of discipline” (Gershoff et al., 2019, p. 16). The government of Western Province in South Africa, on the other hand, defined it (corporal punishment) as any intentional act intended to punish or confine a child by inflicting pain or physical discomfort (Veriava, 2017). According to current figures from the GIEACPC (2022), an advocacy organisation striving to end all kinds of corporal punishment in countries in the world, corporal punishment is still used in a variety of settings in most countries. It can rightfully be asserted that like most social concepts with the advent of time, corporal punishment has also undergone an evolutionary process.

### **A brief description of the evolution of corporal punishment from a global perspective**

Doucette et al. (2014) reported that in 1979, Sweden became the first country to prohibit corporal punishment. Research on Sweden’s experience has revealed that banning corporal punishment, although important, was not sufficient in eliciting cultural change, and educational initiatives throughout the country were necessary. The ban was accompanied by the dissemination of knowledge through many media.

In 2004, the Supreme Court of Canada outlawed corporal punishment in all schools, independent, public, or private. The practice itself had largely been abandoned in the 1970s, when parents placed greater scrutiny on the treatment of learners at secondary schools (Block, 2005). Block stressed the point that the subject received extensive media coverage, and corporal punishment became obsolete because the practice was widely seen as degrading and inhumane. Even though the tradition had been forgone for nearly 30 years, legislation banning the practice of corporal punishment entirely by law was not implemented until 2004.

Corporal punishment in China was officially banned after the communist revolution in 1949, and Article 29 of the Compulsory Education Law forbade the infliction of physical punishment on learners (People's Republic of China, 1986). According to Article 37 of the Teachers' Law (People's Republic of China, 1994, p. 7), schools' management "imposing corporal punishment on students and refusing to mend their way after being criticised" are subject to administrative sanctions or dismissal and "if the circumstances are serious enough to constitute a crime, shall be investigated for criminal responsibility according to law."

Zambia, formally Northern Rhodesia, became a republic immediately upon attaining independence from the United Kingdom on 24 October 1964. The Constitution of Zambia (1991) protects people's civil and political rights, as well as their social and economic rights. In line with Zambia's international obligations, Article 15 of its Constitution guarantees both adults and learners the right to protection from torture, inhuman and degrading punishment, or like treatment. The Constitution also protects young persons from physical and mental ill-treatment, all forms of neglect, cruelty, or exploitation. Corporal punishment in Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), was banned and criminalised in 2015 by the Ministry of Education and Training in line with the requirements of its Education and Training Sector Policy of 2011, and the government directed all educational institutions to adopt a positive discipline approach and reject corporal punishment, which is considered inhumane and violent when dealing with school learners (Mabuza et al., 2017).

In Lesotho, corporal punishment appears to be unlawful in schools. Article 4 of its Education Act 2010 prohibited cruel punishment: "A learner shall not be subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment" (GIEACPC, 2020, p. 3). While this does not explicitly prohibit corporal punishment, the accompanying Parliamentary Statement of Objects and Reasons of the Education Act 2010 clarified that one purpose of the law is to prohibit corporal punishment:

The Bill abolishes corporal punishment at schools in accordance with section 8 of the Constitution which provides that a person shall not be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading punishment. (GIEACPC, 2020, 5)

Article 22 of the Children's Protection and Welfare Act 2011 stated that the state has a duty "to formulate policies which will ensure . . . that . . . school discipline is consistent with a child's rights and dignity" but it does not explicitly prohibit corporal punishment (GIEACPC, 2020, p. 7).

Gershoff and Font (2016), in their study of the use of corporal punishment in the United States of America, noted that school corporal punishment is presently permitted in 19 states in the United States of America, with over 160,000 children subjected to it each year. Many African countries still use corporal punishment in schools (GIEACPC, 2017). Studies presented in a report by GIEACPC (2017) indicated that in Botswana, 92% of learners were beaten in school. In the Gambia, corporal punishment was utilised in 70% of schools. In Uganda, 79% of the kids agreed that they had experienced some form of corporal punishment. The report further reiterated that 38% of 8-year-old learners in Ethiopia reported receiving corporal punishment from their teachers in the week before the survey, and 76% of them said they had seen other learners experiencing

corporal punishment.

These statistics present a state of wide use of corporal punishment in various countries. Universally, an estimated 1.2 billion learners are subjected to corporal punishment each year. In Africa and Central America, 70% of learners experienced school corporal punishment in their lifetime. Lower rates were found in the western Pacific region, with lifetime prevalence about 25%. Across all regions, corporal punishment was reported to be common at secondary/high school levels (World Health Organization, 2025).

The brief discussion about the evolution of corporal punishment as a means of maintaining discipline using a global perspective shows that the change, in the countries discussed, has been towards a more humane way of maintaining discipline. The question that guides this research question is now expounded.

### **Research question**

Utilising corporal punishment could result in charges of assault against a person, and one could be removed from the teaching profession (RSA, 1996b). Yet despite these unpleasant consequences school management persists in using corporal punishment. Hence, the question that guides this research is “What are teacher perceptions regarding the abolishment of corporal punishment in selected schools in Tshwane North District?”

### **Research aims and objectives**

In answering the research question the main aim that needs to be realised is to:

- Investigate the reasons why teachers seem so reluctant to change their mental models that shape their perceptions about maintaining discipline in the teaching environment.

To achieve this main aim, the following objectives, need to be attained namely to:

- Analyse the data collected using principal component analysis (PCA) to investigate if the observed variables clustered together to form any underlying latent constructs (factors).
- Investigate any possible causal relationships between the factors or latent variables resulting from the factor analytic procedure.

### **Theoretical framework**

Best and Kahn (2006, p. 21) saw a theoretical framework as “an attempt to develop a general explanation for some phenomenon.” Given that this research was about opposition to changing the illegal practice of corporal punishment as means to discipline, the dialectical theory of change was selected. The dialectical theory of change used here is in terms of a practical explanation by applying it to the use of corporal punishment. The act of abolishing corporal punishment sets up consequences that work against its effectiveness (Morgan, 1997). This view from Morgan is like

that of Mokyr (as cited in Fourie (2023, para. 14) who wrote “Every invention is an act of rebellion against former convictions and deep-seated beliefs.” This implies that even if one were to find a solution to one of the evils in society this does not mean that everyone will immediately accept it. Furthermore, one does not know what unanticipated consequences such innovations can lead to. As a historical example of the above statement Fourie used an anecdote of the use of oranges and lemons in counteracting the scourge of scurvy among sailors as early as the 15th Century. The use of citrus fruit to combat scurvy among early sailors was discovered by James Lind in 1753 but it was only in the next century that vitamin C, commonly found in orange and lemon juice, was utilised. At the beginning of the 19th century, sea captains eventually realised the importance of orange and lemon juice as an antidote to scurvy and this precipitated the search for these forms of citrus juice. Sicily in the South of Italy was one of the places where such citrus was available. However, this discovery led to farmers in Sicily having to protect their valuable newfound resources of citrus, and to them establishing their own police force which became known as the “Sicilian mafia.” The consequent dysfunctions caused by the mafia are still present virtually everywhere in the modern world today.

This article by Fourie (2023) is a reminder that most sociological evils will not just disappear or be solved by new world innovations because the acceptance of change also involves changing “deeply held internal images of how the world works,” which Senge (1990, p. 174) names our *mental models*. For example, the traditional way of enforcing discipline in South Africa was to instil obedience by using fear of punishment such as corporal punishment so that the perceived unethical behaviour would be eliminated. The above anecdote of vitamin C is a reminder of how difficult it is to change a traditional mental image of, for example, discipline and order in schools. Legislation to abolish the use of corporal punishment in schools will not cause it to disappear overnight and the dysfunctional consequences of the legislation may impede its successful implementation for many years to come. As is clear from the use of vitamin C above, every solution leads to a new problem (Morgan, 2007) or potential new futures always create oppositions with the status quo, which is an example of paradox. As each position tends to generate its opposite it is known as a dialectical view of change (Morgan, 2007). Such a view of change is used here as one of the theoretical frameworks that will guide this research study.

## **Conceptual framework**

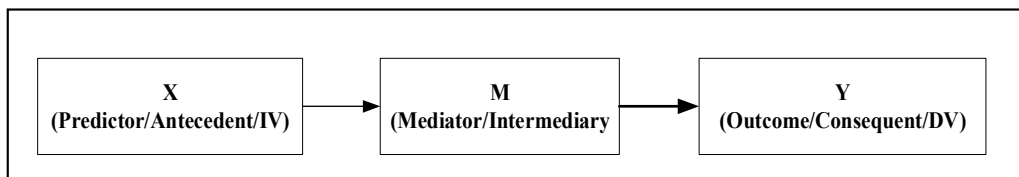
In this research, teacher’s perceptions were made operational by placing 20 statements relating to the abolishment of corporal punishment (the construct) on an interval scale anchored by “strongly disagree” on one side and “strongly agree” on the opposite side of the scale. Items were in the form of statements about the beliefs, traditions, and convictions associated with the controversial issue of corporal punishment and its abolishment in all schools in South Africa. The researchers assumed that teachers with different mental models regarding corporal punishment would have diverse perceptions about its abolishment. For example, teachers with mental models about obedience and traditional modes of discipline, such as using corporal punishment as a deterrent for

poor learner discipline, will view such punishment in a favourable light, whereas teachers who have a human rights mental model, would perceive corporal punishment with abhorrence. Protagonists of the abolishment of corporal punishment were likely to agree with statements that regarded corporal punishment as an act against human dignity whereas advocates of corporal punishment would be likely to disagree with the same statement.

To see whether the items correlated with one another in some or other way, PCA with Varimax rotation was used. This procedure achieves parsimony by explaining the maximum amount of common variance in a correlation matrix using the smallest number of exploratory constructs. According to Field (2018) these exploratory constructs are known as latent variables (or factors), and they represent clusters of variables that correlate highly with one another. Furthermore, it was possible that the constructs resulting from the factor analytic procedure could be related to one another in some causal way. Hence, the researchers investigated the plausibility of a latent variable (X) exerting its effect on another latent construct or outcome (Y), with one or more intervening variable(s) M, located causally between X and Y (Hayes, 2018). For example, beliefs and convictions about obedience as antecedent variable was likely to cause a change in any perceived advantages of corporal punishment as outcome variable. Furthermore, this causal effect between the predictor and outcome could be influenced by mediating variables such as perceptions about possible threats to discipline if corporal punishment was abolished. The researchers thus postulated the following conceptual model where construct X was the independent variable, Y was the dependent variable and M was an intermediary variable between them. A simple conceptual model of mediation is given in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

A simple mediation model with M as mediating variable located causally between X as a predictor and Y an outcome



(Adapted from Hayes, 2018)

The conceptual model in this research was that items representative of a certain construct would cluster together in a factor and that these clusters or factors would be causally related to one another. For example, items about the perceived benefits of obedience or compliance are likely to impact on any perceived advantages of corporal punishment. Perceived threats to discipline could mediate or moderate the impact of the benefits of obedience as predicting variable on the paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment as outcome variable.

## **Hypotheses**

The initial hypotheses formulated for this study were:

- Ho: There are no significant causal effects between the latent factors formed from statements about the beliefs and convictions around corporal punishment as a mode of discipline.
- Ha: There are significant causal effects between the latent factors that formed from statements about the beliefs and convictions around corporal punishment as a mode of discipline.

A further assumption at this stage was that the latent constructs that underlie statements about corporal punishment would cluster to form one second-order factor.

## **Research methodology**

Methodology is defined as a section of research in which the methods to be used, the research design, the population to be studied and the research instrument or tools to be used, are described (Lombard, 2007). For Sreekumar (2025), methodology describes the techniques and procedures used to identify and analyse information regarding a specific research topic. It is a process by which researchers design their study so that they can achieve their objectives using the selected research instruments. It includes all the important aspects of research including research design, data collection methods, data analysis methods, and the overall framework within which the research is conducted. It is also depicted as a plan of action to systematically solve the research or the study problem. The research design utilised by these researchers was quantitative because that was best suited to collect and analyse the perceptions of a wide range of teachers about the topic of this research. Quantitative research was used to quantify behaviours, opinions, attitudes, and other variables and make generalisations from a larger population. In addition, quantitative research was used to quantifiable data to articulate facts and reveal patterns in research. This type of research method involved the use of statistical, mathematical tools to derive results (Longe, 2025). The goal of using quantitative research was to understand the relationship between an independent and dependent variable in a population.

An initial probe of the suitability of the closed-ended questionnaire was conducted via a pilot study involving 20 teachers from two schools. Any problems arising from this initial survey, such as items that were unclear, were addressed and the reliability and construct validity of the closed-ended questionnaire items were checked. The Cronbach reliability of 0.840 was acceptable. Following the pilot survey, the researchers made any corrections suggested and conducted the final survey.

The researchers used schools in the Tshwane North District (TND) as their population of research and used simple random sampling to select 10 secondary schools from this district, namely five from township schools and five from city schools. The researchers distributed 300 structured questionnaires and managed to collect 280 that were suitable for data analysis. The other 20

questionnaires were missing, and some teachers were absent on the day of collection.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations in research are a set of principles that guide the researchers' research designs and practices. Researchers must always adhere to a certain code of conduct when collecting data from people or animals (Bhandari, 2024). Additionally, ethics in research refer to widely accepted moral principles governing appropriate conduct towards participants (de Vos et al., 2017). For example, the ethical issues that the researchers have to pay attention are informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, potential for harm, voluntary participation, and results communication. In this study, permission to conduct this research was sought, and granted by the Gauteng Department of Education, Director of Knowledge Management and Research of public secondary schools, TND director, University of Johannesburg, Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee, and all participants. The researchers informed the participants that they were teachers who could assist in answering the questionnaires enclosed in the research. All parties were further informed regarding the objectives of the research project, research methods, and the nature of the participants, confidentiality, anonymity, and publication of the findings. The participants completed the informed consent forms before they participated. The researchers made it clear that the participants' names were not to be used for any other purpose nor would information be shared that revealed their identity in any way. Participants could withdraw at any time should they wish to do so without getting into trouble, or facing any consequence. Moreover, no foreseeable harm would come to the participants because of their participation in the research. The researchers complied with the required acquisition of approval as stipulated.

Before the filling of the questionnaire, some would-be survey participants were interested to know if the completed questionnaires would go through the Minister of Basic Education (MBE), Member of the Executive Council (MEC) in Education, or TND's director of Gauteng Province in South Africa. They were assured that the information would be treated with confidentiality to alleviate concerns that the MBE, MEC, or District director would get access to their responses given that some of the teachers were culprits in the application of corporal punishment in schools. This indicated mistrust, even after the researchers had explained the "safety paragraph" that the information provided would be kept anonymous. Some participants complete questionnaires to avoid empty spaces in the questionnaire, to avoid the researcher to come back to clarify why they haven't completed a specific question in the questionnaire.

### **Results of the data analysis**

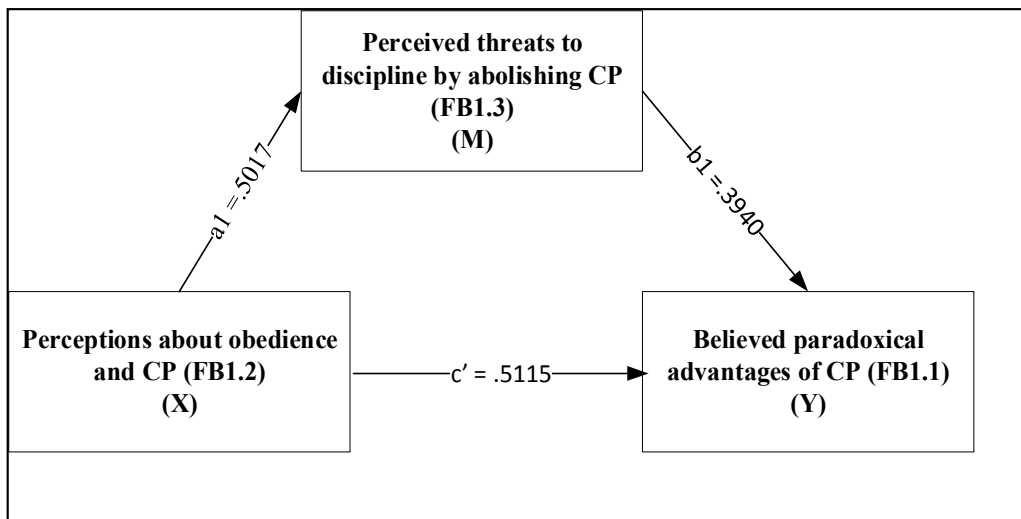
The 20 items were designed to measure the perceptions of teachers in selected secondary schools in TND regarding the contradictory opinions surrounding corporal punishment after its outlawing in 1996 in public schools. The items were placed on a 5-point interval scale and anchored by "strongly agree" (5) on one side of the scale and "strongly disagree" (1) on the opposite side of the scale. To reduce the 20 items to a more manageable size while retaining as much of the original

information as possible, but still represent the original construct, this researchers made use of PCA with Varimax rotation (Field, 2018). The first factor analytic procedure resulted in four items being negatively correlated with the items. Hence, these four items (B11, B12, B15, and B20) had their scales inverted (Field, 2018). The resulting PCA with Varimax rotation resulted in three first-order factors but four items loaded highly on two of the factors (B18, B15Rec, B17, and B1). To facilitate the reduction, these four items were removed from the factor analytic procedure. The resulting KMO of 0.908 and Bartlett’s sphericity was  $p < .000$ . All measures of sampling adequacies (MSA’s) were  $> 0.70$ , and average communality of 16 items was 0.723. These values indicated that the three factors formed a plausible solution and explained 72.33% of the variance present. These first-order factors with their items, reliabilities and names given were:

- FB1.1: B9, B8, B7, B10, B11Rec, B12Rec, B19, B20Rec, B5, B16. The factor had an Alpha reliability of 0.950 and Omega reliability of 0.949. It was named “Believed paradoxical advantages about corporal punishment” (FB1.1).
- FB1.2: B4, B5, B6. The Alpha reliability was 0.861 and the Omega was 0.879. It was named “Perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (FB1.2).”
- FB1.3: B13, B14, B2. The factor was named “Perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment (FB1.3).” It had a Cronbach value of 0.749 and Omega of 0.793.

**Figure 2**

Perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (X) being the causal effect of the believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment (Y), acting via perceptions about perceived threats to discipline (M) as mediating variable



Earlier, it was hypothesised that the perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (FB1.2, the traditional mental model of discipline) as predictor (X) would act as the cause for the believed

contradictory advantages of corporal punishment (FB1.1), as outcome variable (Y). Furthermore, perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment could act as a mediating variable (M). Hayes (2018, p. 67) indicated that “a mediation model links a putative cause (X) to a presumed effect (Y) at least in part through a mediator variable (M).” The conceptual diagram is given in Figure 2 and given that it is like the statistical diagram, the values of the indirect and direct effects are also shown in the diagram.

The researchers made use of the process model of Hayes (2018) in SPSS 28.0 software version, and the various outcomes produced are given in Tables 1 to 5.

**Table 1**

Table showing the results of the traditional perceptions of obedience and corporal punishment (FB1.2) as predictor on variable perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment (M or FB1.3)

Model: 4						
Y: FB1.1—Believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment						
X: FB1.2—Traditional perceptions of obedience and corporal punishment						
M: FB1.3—Perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment						
Sample						
Size: 280						
Outcome Variable:						
FB1.3 (M)						
Model Summary						
R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.5021	.2521	.9697	93.7209	1.0000	278.0000	.0000
Model						
	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.3605	.1258	18.7647	.0000	2.1129	2.6082
FB1.2	.5017	.0518	9.6810	.0000	.3997	.6038

**Discussion about the results in Table 1**

The data in the beginning of Table 1 show the name of the outcome (FB1.1 or Y), the predictor (FB1.2 or X), and the mediator variable (FB1.3 or M). The path (a1) in Figure 2 gives the value of the effect on perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment (M or FB1.3) resulting from the perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (X or FB1.2—X → M). The perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (X) significantly predict the perceived

threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment (M) via the regression coefficient  $b(a1) = .5017$ , 95% CI [.40, .60],  $t = 9.68$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). The  $R^2$  value indicates that the paradoxical perception about the advantages of corporal punishment explains about 25.21% of the variance present in the perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment and the positive value of  $a1$  indicates that as the perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (X) increase, so too do the perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment (M) (Field, 2018). If the X and M variables are changed so that M is the predictor then the  $R^2$  value remains identical and hence this pathway is recursive (Arbuckle, 2007).

**Table 2**  
The total effect model

Outcome Variable:						
FB1.1 (Believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment or Y)						
Model Summary						
R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.8072	.6516	.4312	259.0028	2.0000	277.0000	.0000
Model						
	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	.4276	.1263	3.3859	.0008	.1790	.6763
FB1.2	.5115	.0400	12.7976	.0000	.4328	.5901
FB1.3	.3940	.0400	9.8504	.0000	.3152	.4727

**Discussion of results in Table 2**

The output in Table 2 shows the effect of both the perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment (FB1.3 or  $M \rightarrow Y$ . See  $b1$  in Figure 2) and the effect of perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (FB1.2 or X) on the believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment (FB1.1 or  $X \rightarrow Y$ . See  $a1$  in Figure 2). In agreement with Field (2018), the results of the regression of believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment (Y), is predicted from both perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (X or FB1.2) and perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment (M or FB1.3). The appropriate values for FB1.3 or M (see  $b1$  in Figure 2) are  $b(b1) = 0.3940$ , 95% CI [0.32, 0.47],  $t = 9.85$ ,  $p = 0.000$ . In addition (FB1.2 or X) “perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment” (see  $c'$  in Figure 2) also had a significant effect on Y (believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment) with results  $b = 0.5115$  (path  $c'$  in Figure 2), 95% CI [0.43, 0.59],  $p = 0.000$ . The  $R^2$  value indicates that the model explains 65.2% of the variance in the believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment (Y), by both X and M. Both values are positive and as their

values increase so too does the believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment (Y). Hence, as the unruly behaviour in schools increases so will the perceived threats to discipline be ascribed to abolishing corporal punishment, which enhances the traditional perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment that school management have. The pathways between these two variables are also recursive as the threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment (M) depends on the perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (X) and vice versa (Arbuckle, 2007).

The next output shows the total effect of perceptions of abolishing corporal punishment on the threats to perceived threats to discipline (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

The total effect of perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment on believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment (Y)

Total Effect Model						
Outcome Variable:						
FB1.1 (Believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment)						
Model Summary						
R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.7277	.5295	.5802	312.8934	1.0000	278.0000	.0000
Model						
	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	1.3576	.0973	13.9521	.0000	1.1661	1.5492
FB1.2	.7091	.0401	17.6888	.0000	.6302	.788

### Discussion of data in Table 3

The output in Table 3 shows the total effect of the perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (X or FB1.2) on the believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment (outcome FB1.1 or Y). The total effect is the effect of the predictor (X or FB1.2) on the outcome (believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment FB1.1) when the mediator (M) is not present (Field 2018). This is synonymous with conceptual diagram given in Figure 2. When perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment (FB1.3 or M) are not in the model, the perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (X or FB1.2) significantly predict the believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment (Y). The appropriate values were  $b = 0.709$ , 95% CI [0.63, 0.79]. The  $R^2$  value indicates that the model explains 52.95% of the variance in the believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment (Y). The positive value of the regression coefficient ( $c'$ ) indicates that as the perceptions about obedience and corporal

punishment increase (X) so will the believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment (Y). Hence, as school management’s perceptions about unruly and violent behaviour in schools increase so too will their perceptions about the advantages about corporal punishment also increase and vice versa increasing the paradoxical perceptions about corporal punishment.

The most important part of the model is present in Table 4 because it displays the results of the indirect effect of perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (X) on believed paradoxical perceptions of corporal punishment (Y) (namely the effect via the mediator or perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment (FB1.3 or M).

**Table 4**  
The total effects model (direct plus indirect)

Total effect of X on Y					
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
.7092	.0401	17.6888	.0000	.6302	.7881
Direct effect of X on Y					
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
.5115	.0400	12.7976	.0000	.4328	.5901
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:					
	Effect	Boot SE	Boot_LLCI	Boot_ULCI	
FB1.3	.1977	.0280	.1460	.2563	

**Discussion of results in Table 4**

The data in Table 4 is said to be the most important part of the mediation model (Field, 2018). It displays the results for the indirect effect of the perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (X) via the effect of the moderator (perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment FB1.3 or M). The first part of Table 4 shows the effect of the perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment in isolation (the total effect = 0.7091). Next the table shows the effect of perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (X) when perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment (Y) are also included as predictor (the direct effect or b (c’) = 0.5115). The total effect is the sum of the direct effect (c’) and the indirect effect (a1 x b1 = 0.5017 x 0.3940 = 0.1977. Hence DE (0.5115) + IE (0.1977) = TE (0.7092) (see Table 4).

From the data it can be observed that the indirect effect of X (perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment) on Y (believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment) has an indirect value of b= 0.1997 (a1 x b1). One also has the 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals as

well as the standard error. Assuming this sample is one of the 95% that hits “the true value” (Field 2018), then one knows that the true b-value for the indirect effect lies between the confidence intervals of 0.146 and 0.256. If the confidence intervals do not contain zero (and they do not) then this supports, the hypothesis that the “perceived threats in discipline by abolishing corporal punishment (M or FB1.3)” really does mediate the relationship between perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (X or FB1.2) and believed paradoxical advantages about corporal punishment (Y or FB1.1). This finding could be said to support the initial alternative hypothesis that there are significant causal effects between the latent factors that comprise the construct formed from statements about corporal punishment as mode of discipline.

If the interaction between FB1.2 (perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment) and FB1.1 (paradoxical perceptions about corporal punishment) was significant then one could also conclude that FB1.2 was acting as a moderating variable. The results of the interaction from the process model 4 are given in Table 5.

**Table 5**

Test for the interaction between paradoxical perceptions about abolishing corporal punishment (X) and perceptions about obedience if corporal punishment is abolished (M)

Test(s) of X by M interaction:			
F	df1	df2	p
.2405	1.0000	276.0000	.6242

### Discussion of data in Table 5

The results indicate that the interaction was not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). Hence, FB1.2 (perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment) acts as a mediating variable between perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment (X) and believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment (Y) as outcome variable. Thus, a management’s perceptions about perceived threats to discipline by abolishing corporal punishment, acts as a mediator between his/her perceptions about obedience and corporal punishment as predictor to his/her believed paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment as outcome variable. The three latent factors shown in Figure 2 were subjected to a second-order factor PCA with Varimax rotation procedure to see if they would cluster into fewer factors.

### Second-order factor analytic procedure

This procedure resulted in one factor which the researchers named “FB2.0—School management perceptions about the contradiction around abolishing corporal punishment from selected secondary public schools in TND (The perceptual paradox around banning corporal punishment from public schools).” This second-order factor contained 16 items and had a Cronbach reliability of 0.950 and Omega reliability of 0.951. However, the reliability would improve considerably if one removed another three items namely (B4, B2, and B13).

The 13 remaining items were now subjected to a new factor analytic procedure using a PCA with Varimax rotation. The KMO value of 0.921 and Bartlett's sphericity of  $p = .000$  suggested that one factor was plausible. The name of the factor was kept the same as the removal of the three items made no observable difference except to improve the reliability. The Cronbach reliability was 0.954 and the Omega reliability was 0.955. All items loaded on one factor only with loading greater than 0.70 indicating concurrent validity. The items thus measured the same construct.

The high average loading of the items (0.806) in the paradoxical advantages of corporal punishment factor shows concurrent validity, and the items all converged onto one construct. The mean score of 2.84 lies close to a neutral opinion if one were to interpret the scale value of 3.00 as being neutral. This neutral score seems logical in the light of corporal punishment being banned in public schools given that management are possibly afraid to give an honest opinion about such a controversial topic. Corporal punishment is also a highly contentious topic and banning it means that much management change their traditional mental models surrounding discipline. Such change takes time and generates resistance. Furthermore, the banning of corporal punishment is believed by many teachers in management positions to have been dysfunctional given that severe disciplinary problems have increased drastically in public schools in South Africa. Hence, the banning of corporal punishment can also be perceived as paradoxical in its outcomes. The data distribution was normal indicating parametric statistical tests could be used. The factor had a mean of 2.84, SD of 1.09 and median of 2.77. The 95% confidence interval had a lower value of 2.71 and upper value of 2.96. However, there was large variation of opinion as numerous respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the items in the factor while many agreed and even strongly agreed with the items in the factor. This also shows the contradictory nature present in the original items about corporal punishment and the use of the word paradoxical.

## **Recommendations**

This research study showed that the perceptual model of teachers around the abolishment of corporal punishment was built on three latent factors, namely, perceptions about obedience, about threats to discipline, and about the paradoxical advantages around the abolishment of corporal punishment as means of discipline in public schools. It was found that the beliefs about obedience causally influence both the perceptions about the threats posed by abolishing corporal punishment and the contradictions (paradoxes) about the abolition of corporal punishment. These three latent factors also interacted reciprocally with one another. It is recommended that this model be presented to teachers in a visual form and then utilised as an open discussion to challenge beliefs and assumptions about corporal punishment and why it was abolished.

Challenging one's beliefs and assumptions is never easy, but can be achieved by using:

- Inquiry (asking questions to check your assumptions). A teacher using corporal punishment, an illegal act, must ask themselves, "what is my predominant way of thinking?" "Why did I use it?" "Is it the best way of getting the child to accept responsibility for their

own actions?” These questions need to be asked before the effect occurs otherwise it will lead to second-order thinking about the effect of the effects.

- Dialogue (working together to tackle complex problems). When using dialogue these researchers mean an open discussion where one is allowed to speak one’s mind without possible repercussions for expressing an “illegal” opinion. Dialogue also involves a process of listening to what others have to say, and to do this with an open mind. There is nothing more difficult than having a discussion with a person who has been indoctrinated into certain ways of thinking and action and attempting to get such a person to also listen to other opinions. To get such a person to be open to other points of view one must convince them about the importance of reflection.
- Reflection (paying attention to your thoughts, feelings and behaviours and what effect these may have on you and others around you). This is easier said than done, and reflection is a behaviour many people do not indulge in. For example, when using corporal punishment as means to discipline it is important to think about it and to reflect by again asking yourself if there is not a more effective way to obtain discipline that will result in a behavioural change more permanent and lasting. By listening (without judging the speaker) one could get another point of view. In addition, there is much literature available about more effective ways of obtaining obedience or positive behavioural change than using corporal punishment.

A traumatic experience in one’s life is also a good place to begin if wishing to change one’s predominant way of thinking. So, as member of the school management team one could approach a teacher who has been charged with “assault to do bodily harm to a learner” and get them to share the journey of the painful story with you and your staff. This distressing experience is then an episode that could lead to a fruitful dialogue between all concerned.

A lack of extra-curricular activities results in academically weak learners losing self-assurance and their talents are hardly noticed. These types of learners can be upset and divert their energy into troublesome classroom activities. The lack of extracurricular activities leads to disciplinary problems, especially among learners with sporting talents and who have excessive amounts of energy to expend. Keeping such learners busy could assist discipline in many ways. According to Stickl (2017), one way of involving learners’ misbehaviour in class is to use extracurricular activities to give them an opportunity to take leadership roles by mentoring and organising school social events. To shine on the sports field adds another dimension to a child’s self-esteem and this can also influence their confidence in the classroom.

Murphy (1995) suggested that learners be involved in deciding classroom rules and procedures. This suggests that teachers should always be involved in ensuring that classroom discipline is maintained, but in consultation with the learners in order that the democratic part of the process prevails. Notwithstanding having the guidelines on how to maintain discipline, many schools still resort to corporal punishment. The learners’ code of conduct was designed with the purpose of generating a safe and secure learning environment in which a learner is not denied the right to be

treated fairly and responsibly, to validate an acceptable level of respect, to be taught in a safe and disciplined learning atmosphere, and to be treated with self-respect and deference. The school's disciplinary policy and relevant regulations need to be fairly and consistently applied when management acts against unruly behaviour. In validating the classroom rules idea, Charles (1992) pointed out that for rules to be effective, they should be jointly formulated.

In prohibiting corporal punishment in schools, learner-centred disciplinary measures need to be explored, that is, learners should be involved in designing classroom rules, admission, religious or language policy, and the code of conduct of the school. This will help in making learners feel a sense of ownership with the policies and rules, leading hopefully, to a stronger need to uphold them. The enforcement of such rules and policies gives learners a sense of security; as such learners are bound to be more supportive, as opposed to having rules and policies imposed on them. Msomi (1999) stressed the point that in learners designing classroom rules, admission, religious or language policy, and the code of conduct of the school, would eventually bind them for the rest of the academic year.

The alternatives to corporal punishment presuppose that discipline is an ongoing process, and results cannot be achieved on the basis of one incident. Discipline can also not be instilled through a once-off response by teachers to a single incident of negative behaviour. Given that corporal, and emotional, punishment is not an acceptable form of punishment, the alternatives to corporal punishment are:

- Learners be praised when they obey, or do things well. This encourages them to model their behaviour on positive reinforcements, it also encourages them to learn self-discipline.
- Leading by example, not allowing learners to use dirty language or to swear, neither should the teacher.
- Learners should not be threaten or shouted because they are frightened or bullied.
- Positive words should be used to describe learners not naming, bad-mouthing, and humiliation, as a forms of punishment
- Treating learners with respect is vital.
- Guidance and counselling methods should be use more effectively with learners.
- Children learn by doing, They should be given non-abusive task to perform, preferably one that is related to what they have done wrong. (Childline South Africa, n.d.)

It can also help that conflict is resolved and addressed in the right way (e.g. not to favour one another learner, or taking side), learners, parents, and the public should be allocated roles in schools, policies should be applied to avoid violence, and training strategies of teachers should be arranged not to use corporal punishment.

### **Limitation of the study**

In so far as the research focused on selected TND public secondary schools, it was not possible to use the results to generalise about the use of schools' corporal punishment in all South African

public secondary schools because the study was conducted in one district in Tshwane, Gauteng Province only. In addition, this study used a quantitative approach only. Should researchers make use of mixed method research (MMR, both qualitative and quantitative) it could help to validate the findings through triangulation. A MMR could have led to a stronger set of findings, or possible profounder understandings. Moreover, problems with sample size and choice, financial funds, and the non-return of all questionnaires from respondents, could be considered limitations to the study.

## Conclusion

As a final point, the researchers would like to highlight that a lack of discipline of learners in schools has escalated to such an extent that school management have been brutally assaulted by them (learners) at a disquieting rate. Given that the Department of Basic Education in many discussions sees education as a pre-condition for a child to develop, in the light of the non-compliance of learners to behavioural norms expected, how can such development be possible? The researchers therefore, recommend that the process of minimising or eliminating underprovided discipline in schools be given focused deliberation. To succeed as a country we need to participate more in education that in itself encompasses discipline. For that reason, school discipline is essential in South African schools to assist in building well-disciplined and self-disciplined and accountable citizens.

The investigation of perceptions associated with corporal punishment developed as an important recall theme associated with schooling in the context of a South African background. These recollections have their origins in the previous apartheid system's educational values and practices. While leftovers of the old system persist in the post-apartheid schooling system, teacher education has not responded sufficiently to the seriousness of the insistent breaking of the Schools Act (RSA 1996d). Not only are teachers at risk of wrongdoing, but the learners are denied their Constitutional right to a fearless child-centred education. In this article, the researchers have argued that recollections of an old authoritarian system of discipline may provide a useful broad backdrop to undermine and disrupt teachers' perspectives of corporal punishment that may not be congruent with the moral beliefs of the post-apartheid educational system.

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# Learning to teach again: Navigating pedagogical change in the post-COVID university

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## Abstract

Across the African continent and globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has catalysed significant transformation in higher education. This paper employs the community of inquiry framework to examine how academics at a South African university responded to these challenges during their shift from emergency remote teaching to blended learning. This qualitative paper is based on interviews with 11 academics across six faculties. It provides insight into how academics recalibrated their teaching by introducing new digital practices, reconfiguring student support, and redesigning learning. The findings show the development of a teaching presence and academics' willingness to adopt digital platforms and multimodal learning environments, which enhanced students' access to learning. A key finding is that academics constructed blended and student-centred learning approaches and anticipated discussion and dialogue among students; however, students' engagement was limited, especially in asynchronous spaces. Empathetic presence emerged as an essential dimension, reflecting academics' care and responsiveness to students' socioeconomic challenges. Academics adopted more flexible and student-sensitive approaches to sustain meaningful engagement. The paper suggests that post-pandemic pedagogy must move beyond affective responsiveness to embed student voice, agency, and epistemic inclusion. This paper contributes to comparative debates on pedagogical renewal by responding to Mahlaba and Sekano's (2023) African continental review and Giakoumakis et al.'s (2025) global critique of digital corporatisation, and by calling for internationally compassionate teaching frameworks that support African and Global South universities in building just, dialogic, and connected learning communities.

**Keywords:** post-pandemic pedagogies, blended learning, student engagement, digital technology, empathy

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## **Introduction**

Higher education institutions across the globe were forced to respond to the disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, and this catalysed rapid shifts in teaching practices. At the same time, the pandemic exposed deep-seated structural inequalities in African universities, such as uneven digital access, under-resourced institutions, and complex socioeconomic contexts, which challenged higher education institutions to sustain quality teaching and learning. Higher education institutions in South Africa responded by rushing to emergency remote teaching (ERT), relying heavily on digital platforms such as Blackboard, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and WhatsApp. ERT forced academics to shift traditional teaching practices onto unfamiliar online platforms. During ERT, academics rapidly changed practices and focused on content delivery (Motala & Menon, 2020).

While the pandemic revealed the essential role of digital technologies in higher education, tensions between technological adoption and pedagogical coherence also surfaced. Within the African continent and the broader Global South, questions emerged about how to build more inclusive, dialogic, and relational pedagogies in digital learning spaces. A key concern was digital inequality and infrastructural challenges. These debates resonate with international concerns around the corporatisation of higher education and the pressures of digitalisation (Giakoumakis et al., 2025).

This paper extends these ongoing debates by examining how academics at a South African university of technology (UoT) recalibrated their teaching in the post-COVID context. It explores how their pedagogical practices evolved in response to the legacies of ERT. International and local research has documented the initial pivot to online teaching (Rapanta et al., 2020). A critical concern for the importance of care, training, and emotional resilience during the pandemic emerged (Govender & Mpungose, 2022; Ugwuanyi et al., 2023; Vandeyar, 2023). However, there remains a significant gap in research on how these experiences have shaped academic practice in the longer post-pandemic transition. This paper aims to examine how academics at a UoT reimaged their teaching practices in response to the disruptions of COVID-19, using the community of inquiry framework to analyse shifts in teaching, social, and cognitive presence. The paper analyses the enactments of teaching, social, and cognitive presence in blended learning environments, and identifies the opportunities and limitations of these practices. The objectives are to generate understandings to inform professional development, curriculum design, and institutional support for building more participatory and epistemically just blended learning pedagogies.

## **Adapting teaching after COVID-19**

As universities transition into the post-pandemic period, there has been a gradual move towards blended and hybrid teaching models. Academics predominantly utilised learning management systems (LMS) and other digital tools. Higher education institutions raised concerns about how

teaching methods would evolve, how students would engage with new delivery modes, and how digital tools would be integrated into everyday academic practice.

During the pandemic, Shava (2022) noted that South African universities rapidly adopted information and communication technologies. However, academics had limited knowledge about using online pedagogies (Sayed & Singh, 2020). The transition to online platforms involved the direct transfer of content, often delivered through traditional, lecturer-centred methods. ERT prioritised content over pedagogy, leaving limited space for reflective redesign. Bekker and Carrim (2021) found that 53% of academics retained their original content without modification at the University of the Witwatersrand, while 47% reduced the volume delivered. Despite being online, traditional lecturer-centred approaches remained dominant because the urgency to establish online delivery left minimal room for changing teaching strategies suited to blended and online learning contexts. Academics often overlooked critical reflection on pedagogical practices during ERT.

Fenwick et al. (2021) predicted that the rapid changes in teaching and learning since the pandemic would become permanent. Baker et al. (2022) pointed out that academics and institutions became more flexible during this period, promoting asynchronous and blended teaching. Serdyukov (2015) suggested successful online learning relies on interaction and community, not just content. A key aspect of the debate highlighted by Cope and Kalantzis (2017) is their positioning of pedagogy at the centre of digital learning, which involves an ecosystem in which human, textual, discursive, and spatial elements interact systematically. They argued that these learning ecologies would change engagement between students and academics and between knowledge engagement and assessment.

Another fundamental feature of digital learning is design-based learning. Goodyear (2021) suggested that teachers actively orchestrate the learning process in design-based learning by monitoring, adapting, and intervening as the learning unfolds. Goodyear proposed that traditional approaches expect the teacher to implement a plan and sometimes improvise to fix gaps during lessons. In contrast, design for orchestration explicitly envisions the student as an active participant during the learning activity. Similarly, Fawns (2019) explained that orchestration is crucial because student practices are often unpredictable, leading to a gap between the lecturer's design intentions and the actual, emergent student activity. These perspectives suggest a radical change in the way academics should design their teaching and learning programmes.

Debates on the post-pandemic future of higher education highlight the importance of placing student-centred strategies at the heart of a reimagined and transformed educational terrain (Luvalo, 2024). Brodie et al. (2022) suggested that didactic lecturing should not be the central part of pedagogy but should instead be integrated with other purposeful teaching strategies. Cataldo (2022) advocated for integrating culturally relevant pedagogy into teaching practices, which includes incorporating social and emotional learning and confronting implicit biases. Hlatshwayo and Mbatha (2024) argued for re-centring the Global South and African epistemologies by foregrounding an ubuntu-based curriculum that privileges interconnectedness and collective

humanity, thereby situating its relevance within and beyond the pandemic context. Liasidou (2022) highlighted the digital divide, noting that students from marginalised backgrounds, including those with disabilities, face limited access to technology.

While considerable attention has been given to digital equity during the crisis, less is known about how academics adapted their teaching approaches after the pandemic. The paper examines how academics have adapted their teaching through blended learning in response to post-pandemic demands. It argues that while LMS and digital tools are crucial for transitioning from the COVID-19 pandemic to the post-pandemic period, their effective use requires academics to adopt and develop meaningful blended learning approaches. The importance of building purposeful learning designs to transform pedagogies, beyond digital access and empathy, is emphasised. In addition, the paper addresses a significant gap in the literature on how academics have adapted their teaching approaches for blended learning environments.

### **Community of inquiry framework**

This paper uses the community of inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, 2007) to analyse how academics have constructed their pedagogical practices. First conceptualised by Garrison et al. (2000), the framework offers a theoretical model for understanding the dynamics of online and blended learning environments. Based on John Dewey's (1933) philosophy of reflective inquiry, the CoI framework suggests that meaningful learning emerges from sustained collaborative engagement among learners and instructors within a purposeful educational community. A core component of the framework is its articulation of three interdependent forms of presence: cognitive, social, and teaching—each essential for effective learning in online and blended educational contexts.

Cognitive presence refers to students' capacity to construct meaning through sustained reflection and dialogue within online and blended learning environments. Garrison (2007, p. 65) defined it as "the exploration, construction, resolution, and confirmation of understanding through collaboration and reflection in a community of inquiry." Cognitive presence is vital in fostering deep learning and critical thinking within digital learning environments.

Teaching presence focuses on how instructors design, facilitate, and direct cognitive and social processes to achieve educationally meaningful outcomes. Anderson et al. (2001, p. 5) defined teaching presence as "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes to realise personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes."

Social presence, in turn, emphasises the relational and emotional dimensions of learning. It is "the ability of participants to identify with the community, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships by projecting their personalities" (Garrison, 2009, p. 352). Social presence within the CoI framework is multifaceted, encompassing affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion. Research by Xie and Ke (2011) showed that social presence can support cognitive engagement in online courses. In blended learning

contexts, social presence is integral to the learning process.

These three presences interact dynamically to foster an engaging learning experience, particularly in asynchronous learning environments where traditional classroom cues are absent (Garrison et al., 2001). The interrelationships among these presences have also been empirically confirmed in later research examining causal connections within the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2010). The CoI framework emphasises the relational and dialogic nature of learning, emphasising critical discourse, instructor guidance, and a sense of community as central to knowledge construction. The framework has been widely applied in studies across disciplines to evaluate online course design, student engagement, and pedagogical effectiveness (Martin et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2017).

## **Methodology and design**

The study on which this paper is based adopted a qualitative, interpretive methodology to investigate the pedagogical strategies employed by academics at a UoT following the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research explores how people construct and engage with meaning (Patton, 2015). It seeks to understand individuals' perspectives, experiences, and narratives within the context of the systems they encounter daily (Patton, 2015). According to Patton, qualitative research involves examining and interpreting phenomena by analysing words, stories, documents, and observations.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with academics at the UoT, focusing on their pedagogical adaptations after COVID-19. The sample consisted of academics selected through purposive sampling, specifically targeting participants most likely to provide rich information (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Eleven academics were purposively selected for their experience with blended learning approaches. A case study design was employed (Yin, 2018) to investigate how these academics modified their teaching approaches post-pandemic. Bartlett & Vavrus (2017) suggested that a case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of a specific phenomenon.

Laurillard's (2002) conversational framework was used to guide the design of the semi-structured interview questions. The conversational framework encompasses various aspects of learning types, including acquisition, inquiry, discussion, collaboration, practice, and production and emphasises the importance of interaction and dialogue in learning. The interview questions focused on the academics' pedagogical strategies based on Laurillard's learning types, and allowed me to probe their teaching approaches further. The interviews focused on the changes academics adopted during ERT and how they adapted their teaching practices after the pandemic. The interviews took place between September and October 2024, and were manually coded using the CoI framework. This framework was particularly relevant in blended learning environments. Eleven interviewees were drawn from six different faculties as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Interviewees

Faculty	Academics
Faculty of Applied Sciences	3 Academics
Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment	2 Academics
Faculty of Education	2 Academics
Faculty of Informatics and Design	2 Academics
Faculty of Business Management Sciences	1 Academic
Faculty of Health and Wellness	1 Academic

Participants are called “academics” throughout the paper to ensure anonymity. Interviews were conducted in 90-minute sessions via MS Teams. Participants were asked to keep their video on during the interviews, enabling the researcher to observe facial expressions and body language. Interviews were recorded and transcribed via Teams and reviewed for accuracy.

The data were manually coded by identifying key themes related to the pedagogical practices of academics at the UoT. This process involved reading the data closely and comparing it with the theoretical framework of the CoI. Relevant concepts and themes were extracted, coded, and inductively categorised. The four key themes were identified: reshaping teaching presence through purposeful use of digital tools such as Blackboard and YouTube; cultivating empathetic presence by responding to students’ socioeconomic and emotional needs; constructing blended, student-centred learning environments that emphasise inquiry, collaboration, and flexibility; and grappling with persistent challenges in securing students’ active academic presence.

### **Reshaping teaching presence in digital learning spaces**

This section focuses on the key findings related to the paper’s central question on how the selected academics adapted their teaching practices and incorporated digital technologies in the post-COVID period. Academics’ post-COVID teaching reveals an enthusiastic integration of digital technologies. One academic reflected, “the online side of me is not going away. Since last year, all my content has been on Blackboard.” Before the pandemic, academics often used the Blackboard LMS to upload lecture notes and assessment briefs. Blackboard evolved from a static repository to a dynamic learning space designed for synchronous and asynchronous learning.

One academic observed that “post-COVID, Blackboard became an actual learning environment, not just a place for files.” Blackboard Collaborate was used extensively, particularly for synchronous lectures, real-time screen sharing, and interactive whiteboard use. Another academic

described her Blackboard use:

I used Blackboard Collaborate for all my live sessions. I recorded everything and uploaded it so students could go back and watch at any time. That was critical for those who had data or network issues.

The ability to record sessions ensures that instruction is accessible to all, recognising issues of equity and access. The academics used asynchronous interactions to ensure that all students have access to learning. The mathematics lecturer used the whiteboard function to provide clear steps and a visual representation of the learning. She explained

When teaching formulas, I used the whiteboard tool on Blackboard to write and explain the steps as I would on a physical board.

This shows the academics' commitment to providing clear guidance and establishing their teaching presence. At the same time, academics demonstrated the shift from content delivery to facilitating knowledge, which is key to designing for cognitive presence. An academic commented on assessments, stating that:

Moving assessments online made sense. Now, students submit everything via Blackboard; it's cleaner, there's a record, and feedback is more structured.

The focus on tracking and feedback indicates the teacher's guidance and support, core dimensions of teacher and cognitive presence. Their integration of Blackboard with other platforms also allowed for creative pedagogical design. This shift marks a pedagogical rethinking of Blackboard from a content repository to an interactive learning environment, signalling more substantial teaching presence and intentional instructional design. Several academics complemented Blackboard content with external links to YouTube videos, interactive quizzes via Microsoft Forms, and visual presentations using Padlet or Jamboard. One academic remarked on this interconnectivity and the deliberate instructional design, thus:

We still used Blackboard as the anchor but plugged in various tools, such as YouTube videos, Mentimeter questions, and Jamboard slides. It became a blended ecosystem.

These spaces often resembled curated content environments rather than relational learning communities, as academics would identify appropriate videos for students to engage with in their own time and independently. Another academic emphasised the long-term shift in mindset brought about by this platform turn and stated:

The way I use Blackboard now is fundamentally different from before COVID. I think of it as my main classroom, even when I'm teaching in person.

An academic explained that he "uploaded voice-over slides on Blackboard. It was like I was in class. I still do that when I'm unavailable so students can listen independently."

Academics felt that Blackboard was accessible to students and enabled them to access learning materials anytime. The academics established their teaching presence by facilitating and directing the learning processes via Blackboard. Using Blackboard and other tools enabled the lecturers to

provide deliberate instructions and design, establishing active learning, engagement, and collaboration. This reorientation points to a redefinition of pedagogical space. However, even as digital tools enabled more flexible teaching, their uptake did not necessarily translate into social presence and shared meaning-making among students.

A notable development was the post-COVID institutionalisation of YouTube and related video-sharing platforms as pedagogical resources. Initially adopted during remote teaching out of necessity, these platforms are now part of mainstream blended learning approaches. YouTube videos were integrated into the teaching space to supplement live instruction, contextualise theoretical content, and offer students flexible review options. For example, academics in the sciences and mathematics observed improved student comprehension and performance when using videos to assist students with problem-solving sessions. Integrating multimodal resources with other digital tools indicates a blended learning ecosystem where academics arrange and coordinate to extend learning beyond the classroom. However, while technically sophisticated, these tools do not guarantee engagement unless paired with dialogic interaction.

One academic applied video and podcasting tools to teach research processes and used AI-based tools like Notebook LM to transform readings into podcast-style lectures, which students could engage with at their own pace. The academics also facilitated the creation of multimedia portfolios using Canva, PowerPoint, and LinkedIn Learning. One of the academics remarked,

I had to become intentional about using tools like Mentimeter, Teams, and YouTube, not just to show, but to teach.

This statement shows a shift in understanding the pedagogical value of using digital tools.

The academics in the science and mathematics fields prefer in-person teaching, but they also record sessions and use digital tools such as YouTube to reinforce conceptual understanding. Augmenting Blackboard with digital tools such as YouTube shows the revisions in their pedagogical approach, which became a key element of their teaching presence post-COVID. The findings suggest that the post-COVID period has seen the integration of LMS into teaching in more deliberate ways. YouTube and similar platforms are no longer viewed as peripheral but have become central to designing learning, student engagement, and the development of digital competencies.

The data illustrate that the academics' post-COVID teaching practices focus on facilitation and instruction using LMS and other digital tools, reflecting a strong teacher presence. The strategic and purposeful integration of digital tools like Blackboard, YouTube, and other interactive platforms highlighted this integration. The transition from Blackboard as a file repository, mainly used before the pandemic, to an online learning environment shows that the interviewed academics reconceptualised their pedagogical practices to engage more meaningfully to achieve successful student learning.

The significant changes in academics' attitudes indicate a teaching presence and a willingness to create a multimodal learning environment. The academics in this study adapted to Blackboard as

an online space while augmenting their teaching with other online teaching tools, strengthening teacher presence, and showing social presence through the live classroom. These digital platforms reshaped teaching presence, and at the same time, the data revealed an important shift: academics' growing attentiveness to students' lived realities. The following section explores how an empathetic presence emerged in response to socioeconomic challenges and emotional needs in the post-pandemic classroom.

### **The centrality of empathetic presence**

The importance of what I refer to as empathetic presence emerged as a defining feature of academics' post-pandemic pedagogy. Empathetic presence represents the teacher's ability to design learning characterised by responsiveness, care, and attentiveness. The data reveal that academics' pedagogical styles reflected consistent awareness of students' socioeconomic challenges. One academic stated that:

COVID taught us the importance of the student-centred approach . . . because students do not always have access to data, Wi-Fi. . . . You have to be cognisant of how much you can teach in the time you have with them.

This insight reflects how the pandemic sharpened awareness of digital and infrastructural inequities. Academics responded by building flexibility into course design, often allowing asynchronous participation and extended submission windows.

An academic recounted how students' data constraints informed flexible submission policies in the post-COVID period. She explained, "students only have data after midnight, so we keep submissions open after midnight." Most of the interviewed academics recorded lessons so that their students with connectivity and data challenges could access the learning activities and learn asynchronously. Academics revealed their flexibility when designing blended learning pedagogies, such as email submissions, when Blackboard had technical problems, screenshot submissions and extended deadlines until midnight to accommodate students with data access after-hours.

These practices reflect academics' recognition of the unequal conditions under which many students were learning. Beyond accommodating need, these practices reflected a more profound pedagogical shift toward responsive, humane teaching that considers learners' material conditions. The academics continued to record lessons in the post-pandemic so that their students with connectivity and data challenges could access learning activities asynchronously. These practices, developed during the ERT, have been retained post-COVID. They show a dedication to supporting students from diverse backgrounds and their acknowledgement of the varied circumstances that impact access to education. One academic reflected on student access to knowledge by stating that in:

Post-COVID, I simplified slides and used plain language. Before, I assumed students would attend class; now I design materials to stand alone for those who cannot.

Such actions show that the academic responded actively to students' needs and adapted his teaching style. Another academic described her post-COVID pedagogy as working "with the heart of the student," integrating reflective journaling and group activities to deepen relational engagement. Another emphasised the importance of treating students as people, not objects, and practising patience as students adjusted to unfamiliar learning modes. These efforts show how empathy was embedded in the classroom.

The academics had a strong awareness of the socioeconomic circumstances. One explained, "You can't assume students have quiet study spaces or devices." Another academic reflected on the resource inequality in his journalism class, highlighted inequitable technological access among students, and adapted assignments to avoid marginalising disadvantaged students. He commented:

Some students' phones cannot stream or run apps like Miro. We must innovate so no one is excluded. When I tell them to use phones, one student has a high-end camera, and another struggles with memory. It's unfair.

Acutely aware of the lack of resources, he shared some of his resources with students. The data show that academics' daily practices were characterised by empathy. Though flexibility and care created more learning opportunities, these did not necessarily result in dialogue, participation, or deep engagement.

Empathetic presence, while vital, must support pedagogical strategies that invite students into the co-construction of learning. Without fostering cognitive and social presence alongside empathy, academics risk cultivating a compassionate but disengaged classroom. The following section explores how academics attempted to address this by designing blended, student-centred learning environments.

### **Constructing blended and student-centred learning approaches**

The data illustrate that blended learning became the dominant pedagogical model post-pandemic, combining digital and in-person modalities to initiate learning experiences. These blended environments consisted of interactive tools, online assessments, and classroom simulations. The academics focused on designing activities that focused on inquiry and active learning strategies and went beyond just content delivery. A key shift involved integrating simulations and virtual tools that prime students for deeper understanding. An academic described how simulations, such as the BioNetwork virtual microscope and an online photosynthesis module, were retained even after returning to campus. This academic noted:

Even after returning to campus, I kept the simulations. They help prepare students before face-to-face practicals. When they enter the lab, it's not their first encounter with the material.

The hybrid nature of her pedagogical approach ensured that learning could take place flexibly across both online and offline environments and showed an attempt to scaffold learning. By structuring learning this way, students are better prepared for deep applied learning, enhancing cognitive presence. The academics designed activities that emphasised inquiry and active learning.

There was a clear move from traditional, lecturer-centred instruction toward exploratory learning. Strategies like synchronous discussions, real-time polling with Mentimeter, and journaling were designed to encourage students to seek information, share ideas, and examine different perspectives.

One academic illustrated the shift toward student-led inquiry as an adapted pedagogical approach, stating, “Now, I want students to generate questions. . . . I’ve moved away from just lecturing.” Her reflection shows a commitment to change her teaching practices in response to the post-COVID learning context. This approach reimagines the classroom as a collaborative space where knowledge is co-constructed, moving the focus away from content transmission toward shared meaning-making. It exemplifies a broad pedagogical transition from traditional lecturing to active, inquiry-based learning centred on student engagement.

The data show that the academics used group work and peer feedback to encourage collective meaning-making, indicating the deliberate design of collaborative learning experiences as central to building problem-solving and reflection. One academic’s journey from individualised feedback to group-based learning, self-reflection, and creative projects on Blackboard highlights a focus on student agency and collaborative knowledge-building. These activities reflect an epistemic shift, repositioning students as active knowers within the learning process.

Academics described a range of pedagogical strategies aimed at fostering active and collaborative learning. One academic highlighted the use of role-play to cultivate soft skills such as public speaking and confidence. Collaborative group activities encouraged students to engage in discussion and collective idea generation. Real-world examples, including student-shared photographs and community stories, were also incorporated to deepen active learning and support collaborative sense-making. Another academic reported integrating ChatGPT into literature review tasks to promote students’ critical engagement with digital tools, explaining that prompting students to critique ChatGPT’s reasoning strengthened their analytical thinking. Digital platforms such as MS Teams were further employed to facilitate ongoing feedback and sustained dialogue with students.

This theme highlights the interplay between innovation and engagement. While academics designed more inclusive and participatory environments, student presence remained inconsistent. The data suggest that blended learning spaces need more than well-crafted tools and student-centred activities, require relational depth, clear expectations, and pedagogies that motivate students to invest meaningfully in the learning process. While care and flexibility formed the basis of a more humane teaching approach, the academic noted that these efforts did not necessarily lead to active student presence. The following section discusses the challenges of activating the academic presence of students and the difficulties of sustaining this in post-pandemic times.

## **Challenges in activating students' academic presence in blended learning approaches**

The data show the persistent challenges in activating students' academic presence within blended learning contexts in the post-COVID era. Academic presence is defined as students' active participation in cognitive and social processes of the blended learning environment. Academics reported a marked drop in student attendance after the pandemic, particularly in blended or asynchronous formats. One of the academics explained:

Attendance is a problem because students say, "the lecture is on Blackboard, I'll read it later, so I don't need to attend class."

Another added. "Basically, attendance is poor because everything is online." These reflections suggest that the accessibility of lecture notes and recorded videos led some students to opt out of live sessions, contributing to reduced classroom engagement. Beyond being physically absent, many students who attended online or face-to-face classes were passive. They did not actively participate in classes. Academics consistently struggled to get students to engage in discussions or answer questions. For instance, during the period of fully online teaching, one academic commented that "they didn't respond most of the time." An academic reflected that students hesitated to respond in person after being used to virtual classes. She commented:

This reluctance to speak up persisted even after returning to campus. "Now they're face-to-face. . . you can see a pushback . . . they didn't want to answer. They would just sit quietly.

These patterns suggest a redefinition of student engagement, with students prioritising convenience and minimal engagement over collaborative learning. One academic expressed her frustration, stating that when in-person classes resumed, staff struggled to encourage students to return, feeling that many students did not care. They observed that only a small fraction of the class participated, while the rest remained quiet. She suggested:

If only 10–15 people are the ones who are constantly giving me feedback out of 50, I'm always wondering whether the other 40 are following or not.

She estimated that "in some live online sessions, only about 30% of the class participated actively." The academic's remarks imply that many students were either absent or not mentally present during lessons. This reluctance signals deeper disconnection issues, possibly shaped by prolonged isolation and habits formed during remote learning. Dialogue and co-construction were stalled because of the students' lack of engagement. An academic described her facilitation style as giving direct instructions in in-person classes to respond to students' passive engagement. She stated:

I'm giving you, you know, 10 minutes to read the article. It's in your folder on Blackboard. And, of course, there was still very little interaction from students. Students don't participate in that unless it's for marks.

Students demonstrated a greater tendency to engage in practical or hands-on sessions, particularly

when grades were at stake. An academic noted that she “realised that if we don’t assign marks to the work, then . . . they simply do not participate in the activity.” This points to a deeply embedded transactional approach to education, where learning is reduced to assessment and presence becomes performative rather than participatory. The academics attempted to promote active class participation, but many students remained silent, rarely asking questions or volunteering answers in the post-COVID classroom. Academics had to consider rules and policies to link attendance to grades or exam eligibility to foster engagement.

Some students skipped synchronous online meetings, planning to watch recordings later, while others did not attend optional activities. The in-person classes also suffered when students failed to appear. Low physical or virtual attendance meant students could not actively engage in learning. The academics also pointed out that students were not submitting assignments on time and showed a lack of accountability for their coursework. One academic described how the nature of student consultations changed after the pandemic, stating:

Rather than seeking help before deadlines, students now often come after missing a due date, essentially expecting leniency.

This academic felt that in the past, students might have been anxious about missing deadlines and came up with reasons and evidence if something went wrong. These narratives show the challenges in post-pandemic learning environments. While academics built empathetic, student-centred, and technologically supported pedagogies, student engagement was limited. Students’ academic presence was difficult to sustain unless structured through assessment-linked incentives.

## Discussion

This paper focuses on how academics at a UoT reimagined their teaching practices in response to the disruptions and lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the CoI framework, the findings show a clear shift in teaching presence through the active integration of digital platforms such as Blackboard and YouTube. Academics demonstrated a readiness to use multimodal tools to support asynchronous access.

A key aspect of the CoI framework is the design and organisation of learning; the data show that during the post-COVID period, many academics became more confident in using digital technologies, and Blackboard and YouTube became central to the learning design. These platforms promote passive forms of learning, but academics had anticipated more robust student interaction and participation when using these platforms. Although their teaching presence was strengthened through digital adoption, opportunities to facilitate critical thinking remained limited.

Academics also extended their use of multimodal and artificial intelligence tools such as Mentimeter, ChatGPT, and Notebook LM to promote understanding and exploration, key dimensions of establishing a cognitive presence. These efforts sought to deepen learning and enhance students’ understanding. However, integrating the concepts and real-world contexts was

inconsistent, leading to limited cognitive presence.

Despite the increased use of digital tools, the paper shows that these tools resulted in limited social interaction in learning environments. Social interaction is a key feature of social presence, which was absent in the learning design. Academics did not encourage peer-to-peer dialogue, and asynchronous spaces were designed for individual rather than community interaction. Empathetic presence emerged as a significant aspect of the data as academics showed care and attentiveness in their learning design. The paper reveals a tension between empathy and more equitable access. Challenges among students, such as a lack of data and digital literacy, led to student engagement that was largely instrumental rather than relational. This indicates a need to move beyond access and care toward designing structured opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and peer interaction, enabling students to co-own the learning process.

In blended learning contexts, effective learning requires collaborative engagement and the collective presence of students and academics in the learning community. Academics developed a teaching presence but were less successful in cultivating cognitive and social presence necessary for building a collaborative learning community. Students appeared unfamiliar with relational and dialogical modes of engagement in online environments, and their participation was limited. Moving forward, online student engagement demands new forms of interaction that encourage participatory learning. Achieving such communities in blended environments requires intentional, relational pedagogical design tailored to these contexts. It calls for internationally compassionate teaching frameworks that support African and Global South universities in building just, dialogic, and connected learning communities.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored academic pedagogical approaches after the COVID-19 pandemic. It focused on data drawn from 11 academics across six faculties and reveals a deliberate turn toward digital integration, student-centred strategies, and more empathetic modes of teaching. The paper showed the limitations of blended designs and empathetic presence, particularly when student participation remained minimal, externally motivated, and tied to assessment rather than deep learning.

These findings suggest that academics in the post-pandemic South African context mirror the broader dynamics in African and Global South higher education, where digital expansion and pedagogical care are central to transformative teaching. For blended learning to move beyond inclusion, it must be anchored in practices that foster sustained cognitive, teaching, and social presence. Academics at the UoT demonstrate the importance of embedding epistemic inclusion and cultivating student agency through relational, participatory, and dialogic learning designs.

This paper contributes to continental and international debates on post-pandemic educational renewal by offering grounded insight into the pedagogical labour undertaken at a historically under-resourced South African institution. As African universities increasingly take up the task of reimagining higher education in the face of digital inequality, institutional precarity, and enduring

social divisions, the UoT experience emphasises the urgency of designing pedagogical systems that are technologically responsive, socially just, and ethically grounded.

Future research should explore student perspectives and institutional support in greater depth to better understand how post-COVID pedagogical shifts can be consolidated and sustained. This paper offers lessons that resonate far beyond its context and contribute to continental and global debates on inclusive, compassionate, and future-facing higher education.

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# Leading through mentorship: Exploring women's leadership practices in a school leadership preparation programme at a South African university

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## Abstract

Across diverse global contexts, women in educational leadership continue to navigate gendered challenges, particularly beyond the Western paradigm. Comparative studies across the Global South highlight the ongoing obstacles women face in gaining recognition, despite their transformative potential. Grounded in transformative leadership principles, this study responds to global development priorities, particularly Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5, by foregrounding the experiences of women leaders in complex educational environments. In South Africa, the Advanced Diploma in School Leadership and Management was introduced to strengthen in-service leadership capacity and promote constitutional values of democracy and social justice. This qualitative case study adopts an interpretive approach to explore how women leaders understand and enact leadership and mentorship within workplace project teams. Three female project leaders, purposively selected as the only women leading workplace projects in the programme, participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Findings reveal that the leaders draw on their personal and professional experiences, values, and dispositions to guide and mentor workplace project groups. Their leadership practices are characterised by relational, values-driven, adaptive, and contextually responsive approaches, aligned with transformative and socially just principles. The study highlights how women leaders navigate gendered and institutional challenges while fostering resilience, mentorship, and transformative outcomes.

**Keywords:** women in educational leadership, transformative leadership, socially just leadership, leadership development programmes

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## **Introduction and background**

Over the past three decades, the South African education system has undergone a profound transformation, with an increasing emphasis on leadership that is socially just, inclusive, and democratic. These priorities are reflected in South Africa's post-1994 policy frameworks, which have underscored the need for leadership practices that promote social justice and democracy in education. Within this evolving landscape, leadership is understood as a tool for transformation and empowerment.

Hallinger's (2018) observation that leadership research has been predominantly shaped by studies from Western developed societies highlighted a crucial gap in the literature. He advocated a broader understanding of leadership that recognises the unique challenges and aspirations of diverse societies beyond Western contexts. In line with this perspective, it is critical to listen to the experiences of women leaders in education, who continue to navigate entrenched gendered expectations and marginalisation. Their sharing illuminates how principles of social justice, democratic practice, and policy ideals are enacted in leadership, providing insights that are directly relevant to understanding programmes like the Advanced Diploma in School Leadership and Management (ADSLM). This study aligns with global development priorities, particularly Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5, which promote inclusive and equitable education and gender equality, respectively (United Nations, 2015). There is a need to acknowledge the work of women leaders publicly outside women's rights movements (Hallward & Stewart, 2018). Despite research internationally and nationally highlighting the challenges women as educational leaders experience, there is hope that female educational leaders have the self-assurance to lead confidently and competently in demanding educational contexts (Naidoo & Perumal, 2014).

In response to the complex demands of educational leadership, the preparation of school leaders post-1994 was prioritised in South Africa. A paper commissioned for the 2024/5 Global Education Monitoring Report: Leadership and Education emphasised:

The identification, preparation, selection, and development of educational leaders varies greatly across and within countries, and while there is no consensus on the best approach, there is widespread agreement that it can be improved across all educational leadership levels such as teacher leaders, middle leaders, senior leaders, and principals. (Gurr, 2023, p. 34)

Writing in the African context, Mestry (2017) argued that structured leadership courses should be mandatory for newly appointed principals, suggesting that such programmes, offered by higher education institutions, would ensure that leaders are better prepared for the complex demands of their roles. This proposal highlights the need for formal leadership preparation, emphasising that leadership training is crucial for navigating the evolving challenges of educational leadership in South Africa (Mestry, 2017). A growing body of local and international research underscores the importance of specialised training for effective school leadership. In response to a recognised gap in formal leadership preparation, South Africa's Department of Basic Education (DBE) introduced the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) in School Leadership in 2007, primarily targeting incumbent principals, with eligibility extended to aspiring (deputy) principals. The programme

aimed to equip school leaders with foundational leadership and management competencies.

Policy reforms in 2011 signalled the need for change in school leadership qualifications. In particular, the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (DBE, 2011) and the National Development Plan (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2012) prompted a review of existing programmes. This review revealed a misalignment. The ACE: School Leadership no longer matched the Higher Education Qualifications Framework, and a new qualification was therefore introduced. The ADSLM was designed to meet updated standards and advance the National Development Plan's 2030 goals of strengthening human resources and improving school governance. Further reinforcement came in 2015. The South African Standard for Principals (DBE, 2018) articulated clear expectations for effective school leadership and collectively, these initiatives position the ADSLM as a strategic intervention to enhance principals' leadership capacity in line with evolving national priorities.

The ADSLM was introduced as a professional development programme aimed at equipping school leaders with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed for effective leadership. Yet, little is known about how women leaders experience and enact this programme, particularly in the workplace projects that require them to conceptualise, lead, and mentor teams in areas of school improvement. Their voices and practices remain marginalised in educational leadership research and policy discourse, leaving a critical gap in understanding how gendered leadership is negotiated in this context. Situated within South Africa's broader education reform agenda, the ADSLM reflects national frameworks such as the National Development Plan 2030 (NPC, 2012), the Action Plan to 2024: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030 (DBE, 2020), and Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001), all of which emphasise the cultivation of transformative and socially just leadership to strengthen school quality and equity. Workplace projects within the programme serve as real-world sites for translating these policy aspirations into practice by applying leadership theory and fostering transformative practices.

The women leaders of the workplace projects teams lead and mentor participants—how they experience this programme is important because it might reveal how national policy ideals are enacted in practice, foreground the often-overlooked contributions of women leaders, and advance a more inclusive understanding of leadership development in the South African context. The aim of this article is therefore to explore how women leaders in the ADSLM programme understand and practise leadership and mentorship within workplace project teams. To this end, the study addressed the research question: “How do women leaders in the ADSLM programme understand, experience, and enact leadership and mentorship within workplace project teams?”

## **Women leaders in the ADSLM programme**

### **Conceptualising leadership and mentorship in educational contexts**

Educational leadership is increasingly recognised as a catalyst for change and improvement through the building of collaborative practices and social justice (Harris & Jones, 2023; Shields,

2010). It transcends formal position and calls for a focus on the way leadership is distributed in educational contexts (Grant, 2017). Within professional learning programmes such as the ADSLM, leadership development is fostered and enacted in complex, real-world contexts where participants are expected to apply leadership knowledge and skills to improve school practices (DBE, 2018). The ADSLM programme thus positions leadership not only as a technical role but as a reflective and value-driven practice aimed at fostering equity and inclusion (DBE, 2018). Scholars have also reminded us that leadership is a social relationship of power directed to goals, situated in a sociocultural context, and it is an energy that can spring from anywhere, making deep human connections, having compassion for others with an ethically transformative focus (Grant, 2017; Harris & Jones, 2023; Spillane et al., 2004).

In graduate programmes that prepare educational leaders, mentoring, which is closely related to leadership, is essential. It fosters an opportunity to seek and gain professional knowledge and advice to tackle complex educational leadership challenges (Briscoe, 2019). Mentorship is also described as a practical approach that involves sharing and provides developmental support, promoting confidence and reducing a sense of isolation (see Bush, 2008; Coleman, 2005). When mentoring is seen as a relationship of development, mentors think about how they might help beyond the scope of conventional supervision and counselling by working to improve the lives of those they are mentoring (Lasater et al., 2021). This draws on the mentor's professional knowledge and skills, coupled with collaboration and a genuine concern for the holistic well-being and development of mentees (Lasater et al., 2021).

In the ADSLM workplace projects, participants simultaneously take on the roles of leaders and mentors, balancing the demands of managing team dynamics with nurturing individual and collective capacities. Scholars internationally and in the African context describe this relational and ethical dimension as critical because mentorship builds agency and promotes collaborative learning environments essential for transformative change (see Furman, 2012). Site-based mentoring, as advocated by the ADSLM programme, which encourages school visits as a mechanism for supporting the programme participants (DBE, 2018), facilitates learning “how different school leaders worked and how the various mentors tackled problems in innovative ways” (Low, 2001, p. 33), which can transform practices, especially within the workplace.

Transforming practices in the workplace projects can be framed by transformative leadership theory, which is a praxis that is focused on “equity-driven change through critical reflection, advocacy, and ethical action” (Shields, 2010, p. 559). Within the South African post-apartheid context, this framework is particularly salient because leaders must negotiate complex historical legacies and align with social justice imperatives (Tjabane & Pillay, 2011). As the programme positions women leaders to lead through mentorship in designing needs-based workplace projects, transformative leadership is the most fitting and central framework. It highlights how this dual role drives change in schools while also transforming participants' own leadership journeys, improving education and widening opportunities. Alongside this, Janusian thinking is drawn on to enrich the analysis.

### **Transformative leadership and Janusian thinking**

Transformative leadership is a robust approach that adapts to context, shifting between collaborative, hierarchical, and transactional strategies as needed. Despite the varied styles, its core purpose remains constant: to pursue equity, inclusion, social justice, and a deeply democratic way of engaging with others. It demands a critical, visionary mindset focused on advancing a just global society. More than a theory, it is a foundational framework for leadership aimed at improving education and expanding opportunities for all (Shields, 2010). Building on this perspective, the theoretical framework aligns closely with the leadership and mentorship roles expected of workplace project leaders in the ADSLM programme.

Transformative educational leaders act with courage and purpose to realise the collective promise of education. Echoing Greene (1988, p. 3), this involves nurturing individuals as “citizens of the free world” empowered to choose, act, and help shape a shared world. At its core, transformative leadership seeks not only the well-being of each individual within the school system but also contributes to the broader common good of society (Shields, 2010). Furthermore, the study by Shields does not suggest that transformative leadership is widespread, but it demonstrates its practical potential. In the context of the ADSLM programme, women leaders have the potential to adopt similar values-driven approaches centred not only on effectiveness but on challenging inequities and fostering inclusive and socially just educational environments through their leadership and mentoring roles in the workplace projects. Here, the principles of transformative leadership are enacted in tangible ways: women leaders mentor participants as they identify needs within their schools, design context-responsive projects, and implement changes that directly address inequities. This dual role of leading and mentoring means that the women both model transformative practice and create the conditions for participants to experience it themselves, thereby linking theory to lived professional growth. Although Shields (2010) did not explicitly speak about mentorship, the principles of transformative leadership support the conceptualisation of mentorship as transformative praxis. This close alignment between transformative leadership theory and the actual practices of women leaders in the ADSLM programme reinforces why transformative leadership serves as the key underpinning lens for this study, connecting conceptual understanding directly to observable impact.

Janusian thinking complements transformative leadership in the ADSLM programme by illuminating how women leaders navigate the dual responsibilities of mentoring and supporting participants to implement systemic change in their schools. Rooted in the symbolism of the Roman God Janus, depicted with two faces looking in opposite directions, this approach enables leaders to hold potentially conflicting roles in productive tension. In doing so, they address the complexities of socially just leadership and foster meaningful educational outcomes. Schools operate in dynamic environments, requiring leaders who can navigate complexities and promote change effectively. Msila (2024) emphasised that educational leaders should be both systems thinkers and reflective practitioners. Building on this insight, leadership preparation programmes should intentionally cultivate these capacities to equip leaders for complex educational contexts.

Janusian thinking enhances critical reflection and strategic decision-making by enabling leaders to simultaneously consider the past while anticipating the future (Rothenberg, 2022). By holding and integrating contradictory ideas, leaders gain the cognitive flexibility necessary to adapt practices to dynamic and often conflicting educational realities (Msila, 2024), while advancing social justice and equity principles central to transformative leadership.

Within the ADSLM programme, this lens helps illustrate how women leaders manage the dual responsibilities of guiding participants' workplace projects and thus supporting systemic change in schools. For example, these leaders balance tensions such as tradition versus innovation, authority versus care, and leadership versus mentorship. Applying this framework reveals how they integrate these competing demands productively, respond adaptively to challenges, foster resilience, and promote equitable and inclusive outcomes through these workplace projects. While not the primary focus of Msila's (2024) study, these insights illuminate the intersection of leadership and mentoring in contexts aimed at promoting equity and inclusion. Integrating transformative leadership with Janusian thinking thus provides a robust framework for understanding how women leaders in the ADSLM programme navigate complex challenges while fostering transformative change.

### **Women in leadership: Constraints and opportunities**

Despite South Africa's progressive legislative commitments to equity and transformation, women continue to face significant barriers in accessing and thriving within school leadership roles. Research consistently identifies the persistence of gendered stereotypes, resistance to women's authority, and the privileging of male leadership norms within educational institutions (Coleman, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007). These cultural and institutional dynamics not only undermine women's legitimacy as leaders but also limit their professional advancement, often manifesting in the form of the glass ceiling (Moorosi, 2010). Moorosi explained that this invisible barrier is reinforced through gendered patterns of recruitment, limited access to mentorship, and entrenched assumptions that associate leadership competence with male attributes, thereby systematically restricting women's upward mobility in school leadership.

In the South African context, these constraints are further intensified by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and the residual effects of colonial and apartheid-era structures, which continue to influence the values, hierarchies, and leadership practices within schools (Mestry & Schmidt, 2012). While national policies such as the Employment Equity Act (Republic of South Africa, 1998) and the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996) provided a framework for promoting gender equity and institutional transformation, their implementation has often failed to challenge or reshape the gendered cultures of educational leadership meaningfully. Chisholm (2001) contended that women leaders remain subject to symbolic exclusion and systemic marginalisation, despite these policy advances.

Moreover, even in leadership preparation programmes and mentorship roles, these challenges can persist. Women serving as mentors or project leaders may experience marginalisation, constrained authority, or heightened scrutiny, reflecting the same gendered barriers present in broader

leadership contexts (Ragins et al., 2024; Tuma et al., 2021). This suggests that the experiences of women in programmes like ADSLM are not isolated but are shaped by enduring structural and cultural dynamics that influence how they lead and mentor participants.

Nevertheless, the literature also highlights that within these constraints lie important opportunities. Women leaders often adopt relational, collaborative, and values-driven approaches that challenge hierarchical models of leadership and promote more inclusive and socially just school environments. Blackmore (2010) described leadership as a relational and reflexive practice grounded in emotional awareness and cultural responsiveness. Similarly, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) highlighted how women leaders frequently emphasise a shared power, a collective voice, and a commitment to equity and diversity in their practice. These practices not only serve as a counter-narrative to dominant male leadership norms but also contribute to the broader transformation of leadership culture in schools. In this way, women's leadership, while exposed to possible constraints, is also generative, creating space for ethical, inclusive, and contextually responsive practices that are rooted in values and relationships. This foundation naturally leads to an exploration of values-driven and relational approaches to leadership in education, highlighting how principles such as care, equity, and collaboration shape effective educational leadership.

### **Values-driven and relational approaches to leadership in education**

Ethical and relational dimensions of leadership have increasingly drawn on Noddings' (2003) foundational ethics of care, which emphasises attentiveness, responsibility, and relational interdependence in educational contexts. While Noddings' work primarily addresses moral education and teacher–student relationships, scholars have extended her framework to inform understandings of ethical leadership practices. For instance, Berges-Puyó (2022) explicitly applied the ethics of care to educational leadership, advocating a leadership style grounded in empathy, trust, and responsiveness to the needs of all stakeholders. Similarly, Shields (2010) highlighted the importance of relational and justice-oriented leadership approaches that resonate with care ethics, emphasising leaders' moral commitments to equity and inclusion within diverse school settings. These perspectives challenge hierarchical and transactional models of leadership by foregrounding values, identity, and emotional labour as central to women's leadership journeys in education (Lumby, 2015). Building on this relational foundation, distributed leadership provides a complementary lens, showing how values are enacted collectively rather than individually. Distributed leadership extends these principles by positioning leadership as a collaborative and relational practice that draws on expertise wherever it exists, whether among formal leaders or informal actors within schools (Harris, 2014; Spillane, 2006). In the ADSLM context, women leaders put these principles into practice by engaging colleagues, participants, and communities in mentoring and workplace projects, thereby enacting values-driven, relational, and contextually responsive forms of school change. Together, this body of work situates leadership not merely as an exercise of authority but as an ethical practice deeply embedded in caring relationships and social responsibility.

Leadership is not merely a set of technical skills or managerial competencies; it is deeply rooted in

personal values, lived experiences, and the sociocultural contexts that shape leaders' identities (Lumby & English, 2009). For many women in educational leadership, personal histories often marked by navigating gendered barriers, cultural expectations, and systemic inequities play a formative role in how they lead (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). These experiences cultivate leadership styles grounded in empathy, resilience, and moral conviction. Noddings (2003) highlighted the centrality of care and relational ethics in educational leadership, which aligns with how leadership is enacted, prioritising collaboration, attentiveness to others' needs, and the cultivation of inclusive spaces. Moorosi (2010) further emphasised that women leaders often draw on their biographies and social identities to inform their leadership values, resulting in approaches that are contextually responsive and emotionally intelligent. In the ADSLM programme, these dynamics are reflected as women leaders leverage their personal experiences and values to mentor participants, shape workplace projects, and promote inclusive and socially just outcomes in their schools. In the South African context, women's leadership practices are often influenced by their navigation of post-apartheid educational structures, where personal narratives and gendered leadership identities shape their opportunities and constraints (Davids, 2018; Moorosi, 2010). This reinforces the view that leadership is not value-neutral, but a reflective and identity-based journey informed by who the leader is and what they stand for.

## **Research design**

This study is situated within the interpretive paradigm, which emphasises the subjective nature of human experience and meaning making (Alhoussawi, 2023). It is particularly suited for exploring complex social phenomena such as leadership and mentoring practices of women leaders in the ADSLM programme. A qualitative approach was employed to explore the experiences of three female project leaders, who were purposively selected as the only women leading the workplace projects in the programme. Their extensive leadership experience ensured that the study captured the full range of relevant experiences within this context.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing participants to lead discussions; each lasted over an hour and elicited rich descriptions of their experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Seidman, 2006). All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and a common interview guide was used to maintain consistency and facilitate comparative analysis. Data were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting. Themes were generated inductively from participants' accounts, capturing leadership and mentorship experiences. An abductive approach (Danermark et al., 2002) allowed patterns to be interpreted in light of transformative leadership theory and other theoretical tenets as highlighted in the theoretical section of this paper, thereby refining understanding and linking findings to existing theory.

A limitation of the study is the small sample size, with only three participants included. These women were purposively selected as the only female project leaders, ensuring that the study captured the full range of relevant experiences. While findings are not statistically generalisable,

they provide transferable insights through rich, detailed descriptions, allowing readers to assess applicability in similar contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of leadership and mentorship practices, ensuring that findings were grounded in participants' experiences and connected to theoretical constructs. In the next section, the findings are discussed under eight themes.

## **Discussion of findings**

### **Leadership as influence and vision**

Leadership was described as a relational and reflective practice, enacted through influence, collaboration, and agency. Participants emphasised that leadership is not only about directing others but also about enabling individuals to access spaces or opportunities they might not reach independently. Participant 1 reflected, "I see leadership as influence," and elaborated, "leadership involves motivating, inspiring, but it really is about taking people with you." This emphasis on influence and relational capacity resonates with Spillane's (2006) concept of distributed leadership, where expertise and leadership functions are not confined to positional authority but are enacted collectively. In these projects, leadership was less about command and more about relational influence and vision. The importance of vision was also highlighted. Participant 2 explained:

As a leader, you must have the vision, but with that vision, the empathy to understand the people that you work with.

Similarly, Participant 3 underscored the link between vision and relationships:

Leadership should involve mentoring. If you're a good leader, both leadership and mentoring revolve around people. So relationships are very important.

This aligns with the notion as advocated by Noddings (2003), which highlights the centrality of care and relational ethics in educational leadership. Leadership also requires prompting critical reflection and agency. Participant 2 asked, "What is the legacy you want to leave?" and "How can you be a change agent in that field where you're working?" These reflections illustrate what Shields (2010) termed "transformative leadership," in which leaders act as change agents by unsettling assumptions and fostering ethical and democratic growth. Practical challenges of leadership were also acknowledged. For example, Participant 1 noted:

I had one programme participant this time who is very verbal, and if you give a half a second, she'll take 10 minutes. So, you've got to be very aware of managing those kinds of things.

Evidence exists of practical challenges tackled in appropriate ways (Low, 2001). Thus, leadership in workplace projects was simultaneously about influence, vision, and creating reflective spaces, aligning with both distributed and transformative leadership theories.

**Mentorship as a relational, developmental, and reflective practice**

Participants described mentorship as deeply intertwined with leadership, enacted through relational trust, developmental guidance, and reflective practice. Participant 1 explained: “Mentorship is very much a one-on-one kind of relationship . . . you find the common ground,” while Participant 2 emphasised its guiding role:

Mentoring is absolute guide and support because you need to guide the mentee on how to deal with those challenges . . . you also need to assist them to develop the skills to deal with those challenges.

Reflection emerged as central to development, as Participant 2 noted:

Mentorship also strengthens the leadership skills. . . . You reflect and guide him into understanding how he led in that situation.

Listening and subtle guidance were also highlighted, with Participant 2 noting, “As a listener, they will need to be brought to some sort of equilibrium,” suggesting that moments of disequilibrium are essential for learning. This aligns with Shields’ (2010) view that transformative learning requires unsettling established patterns. Relational trust was emphasised as essential, with Participant 3 observing:

You can be a fantastic mentor, but if there is no relationship with your mentee, it’s not going to work at all.

Mentorship requires leaders to balance providing guidance with allowing mentees to face challenges independently. This reflects what Msila (2024) termed a dual responsibility, whereby leaders develop others while simultaneously negotiating their own leadership role. Such duality aligns with Janusian thinking, the capacity to navigate contradictory demands rather than resolve them by privileging one side. This capacity underpins leadership effectiveness by enabling leaders to manage the tensions inherent in developmental relationships. These practices illustrate the inseparable nexus of mentorship and leadership, aligning with Spillane’s (2006) distributed leadership and Shields’ (2010) transformative leadership. By guiding individuals, influencing groups, and fostering collaboration that engages participants’ expertise, they collectively advance agency, equity, and reflective change.

**The influence of personal values, skills, and experiences in shaping leadership practices**

The women leaders in this study, who led the workplace projects in the ADSLM programme, emphasised that effective leadership is shaped by a complex interplay of personal values, professional skills, and lived experiences, which inform their mentoring and leadership practices. Their experiences revealed that leadership extends beyond positional authority to include the capacity to engage relationally, adaptively, and ethically in diverse educational contexts (Davids, 2018; Moorosi, 2010). These skills and values also equip women leaders to navigate the structural, cultural, and gendered barriers they encounter in their leadership roles, and to integrate tensions inherent in their leadership and mentoring responsibilities, reflecting what Msila (2024) described as Janusian thinking.

### **Relational and values-driven leadership**

Women leaders consistently highlighted relational skills and ethical values as central to their leadership and mentorship practices. Empathy, integrity, professionalism, and a learner-focused approach were described as foundational to their effectiveness. One woman leader reflected on balancing compassion with authority:

Show empathy but also be strict . . . so that they can see both sides of you, but not empathy in a way that is patronising. (Participant 2)

Another emphasised acting consistently according to one's principles:

The most important value for me is integrity . . . to always act in the way that you believe to be the right course of action. (Participant 3)

Mentoring was often framed as relational practice:

I've been more of a mentoring leader . . . walked alongside the staff or pushed them from behind. (Participant 3)

Women leaders also emphasised learner-centred outcomes and high standards to the students on the programme. For example:

Whatever decision I've made . . . has always been in the best interest of the child and education. (Participant 3)

Another reflected:

I like my team to be the best . . . searching for excellence in whatever you do. (Participant 2)

These insights underscore the integration of relational, ethical, and values-driven practices in women's leadership, reflecting a relational justice orientation (Berges-Puyó, 2022; Noddings, 2003).

### **Contextual awareness and adaptive leadership**

Women leaders stressed the importance of understanding the environmental, cultural, and linguistic realities of mentees, adjusting approaches accordingly. One woman leader explained:

Being aware of the people . . . you've got to get into their shoes. Understanding their schools through their lens. (Participant 1)

Clear communication and emotional intelligence were critical, particularly when mentoring individuals for whom English is not a first language:

I tend to talk very fast . . . many of them have a couple of African languages . . . so being clear is essential. (Participant 1)

In addition, women leaders noted that women often foreground listening and approachability:

Listening is more of a woman's skill . . . we are more approachable and softer in our dealings with people. (Participant 1)

Embracing an ethics of care (Berges-Puyó, 2022) and adaptive strategies reflect Janusian thinking,

which enables women leaders to navigate diverse school contexts, build trust, and foster mentees' growth effectively, while preparing them to manage the structural, cultural, and gendered challenges discussed in the following section.

### **Courage, resilience, and problem solving**

Leadership in under-resourced and male-dominated environments requires courage, resilience, and problem-solving abilities. Women leaders described confronting entrenched attitudes, managing conflicts, and fostering innovation. One woman leader reflected:

Sometimes you've got to have great courage as a woman . . . anybody in a promotion post really believes that they're right. (Participant 1)

Another highlighted the value of encouraging experimentation and reflective practice:

I rather you went outside the box . . . when change can happen, not if you're doing the same thing all the time. (Participant 2)

These practices illustrate how women leaders combine resilience (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011) with practical problem solving (Low, 2001) to support mentees' learning while maintaining professional authority and leading confidently and compellingly (Naidoo & Perumal, 2014). They hold the tensions productively to support transformative outcomes (Msila, 2024; Shields, 2010). Such strategies also equipped them to navigate the barriers explored in the next section.

### **Gendered perspectives on leadership**

Women leaders reflected on how gender influences leadership styles, particularly in predominantly male spaces. While acknowledging that leadership qualities are not inherently gendered, they suggested that relational, empathetic, and collaborative approaches are often foregrounded in women's leadership. One woman leader stated:

Listening is more of a woman's skill, I don't negate all men by saying that . . . predominantly we are more approachable and softer in our dealings with people. (Participant 1)

Women leaders also described the need to assert authority and challenge stereotypes, including assumptions that women are relegated to administrative roles:

You show empathy, but also strict . . . in a professional manner. (Participant 2)

This discussion illuminates the interplay between gendered expectations and leadership enactment, showing how effective women leaders integrate relational, ethical, and assertive practices. The analysis reveals that these leaders foreground relational, values-driven, and contextually responsive approaches, combining empathy, integrity, mentorship, resilience, and adaptive problem solving. These findings resonate strongly with the literature on ethical, relational, and transformative leadership among women (Davids, 2018; Moorosi, 2010; Noddings, 2003).

By modelling these practices, women leaders guide mentees while enacting reflective, socially conscious, and collaborative approaches consistent with Spillane's (2006) distributed leadership,

while also signalling a progression towards Shields' (2010) transformative leadership. At the same time, their experiences highlight the ongoing necessity of confronting the structural, cultural, and gendered barriers that shape leadership contexts, as examined in the following section.

### **Challenges and barriers in women's leadership practice**

The experiences of women leaders highlighted persistent challenges shaped by structural, cultural, and gendered factors. These barriers often intersect, requiring women leaders to extend their relational, ethical, and adaptive strategies to establish credibility and influence (Davids, 2018; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Mestry & Schmidt, 2012; Moorosi, 2010).

#### ***Navigating resistance and building influence***

A recurring barrier was the resistance and scepticism women faced when entering leadership spaces, particularly male-dominated ones. One woman leader explained:

Particularly when you go into a school community of practice meeting where they are predominantly men, there is a little bit of scepticism about this woman who arrived from the institution. And culturally, accept that that is part of the culture of our African blacks. I think you really have to work quite hard to be seen as somebody who's got clout, who's got opinions, who's got good thoughts. (Participant 1)

In response, women leaders adopted relational and reflective strategies, influencing change subtly rather than through confrontation:

It is very much a case, I think, to be a mentor . . . you have to understand who you're dealing with, what their life looks like, and what their school looks like. For many of them, they don't actually have much support from their principals . . . you have to work with them to understand how we can do better. (Participant 2)

Women leaders gain legitimacy by negotiating authority through context-sensitive, relational engagement, rather than confrontation. These experiences align with broader evidence of the double burden women face in leadership (see, for example, Davids, 2018; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

#### ***Cultural and gendered constraints***

Cultural expectations and gendered norms constrained women leaders' authority and required additional negotiation. One woman leader reflected:

Being a woman with a predominantly male staff at a school . . . does have a few more issues than when you have more women. (Participant 1)

Women leaders emphasised that entrenched school cultures demanded greater adaptability, tailoring their approaches carefully to build credibility:

You lead and mentor according to the different contexts. You can't just go in with your same approach to every school . . . that connection to build the relationship and get trust was very important. (Participant 2)

These reflections demonstrate how patriarchal and cultural norms intersect with institutional practices, creating rigid environments where women leaders' authority is not automatically

accepted (see, for example, Mestry & Schmidt, 2012).

### ***Recognition, credibility, and emotional labour***

Women leaders also identified the emotional labour required to manage credibility challenges and relational expectations. They described having to continuously prove themselves, often expending energy to counter assumptions of lesser authority. One woman leader stated:

I think you really have to work quite hard to be seen as somebody who's got clout, who's got opinions, who's got good thoughts. And possibly have to work a bit harder than you do with the men. (Participant 1)

Another described the effort of persuading resistant colleagues, balancing firmness with relational tact:

I had to subtly guide him in understanding you can't operate in the medical model . . . you need to move outside of your school to network with people . . . to look at different subject advisors. (Participant 2)

Evidence highlights the constant negotiation of recognition and legitimacy, where emotional labour becomes integral to leadership practice under gendered expectations, reflecting broader scholarship on the dual expectations placed on women in leadership (Beharrie & Mabitsela, 2023; Eagly & Carli, 2007). These barriers align with both national and international research on women in leadership, highlighting the persistence of patriarchal norms and organisational cultures that resist inclusive leadership models (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Moorosi, 2010). While adaptive, relational, and values-driven strategies remain critical, lasting change requires systemic intervention in leadership preparation, policy, and institutional culture, underscoring that individual strategies alone cannot overcome entrenched barriers.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that women leaders involved in the workplace projects within the ADSLM adopt supportive, relational, and empathetic approaches in guiding and mentoring participants through the successful implementation of change initiatives in their schools. Central to this argument is the recognition of these women as legitimate knowers in the field of educational leadership and management, whose dispositions and lived experiences inform transformative, relational, and contextually responsive leadership practices (Noddings, 2003; Shields, 2010). By tailoring their support to the individual needs of participants within diverse school contexts, these leaders embody principles of equity and redress, which are foundational to advancing a broader social justice agenda embedded in our educational policy.

The transformative potential of these leaders was evidenced through the experiences captured in this study. Their experiences illustrate how university programmes can benefit from engaging leadership expertise beyond the academic community, leveraging lived experiences as a valuable pedagogical and developmental resource. This collaborative engagement serves as a catalyst for transformation and reflects principles of transformative leadership, where women leaders

challenge entrenched inequities while fostering inclusive possibilities (Shields, 2010). At the same time, their capacity to hold tensions, for example, looking backwards to histories and constraints while envisioning forward-looking change, illustrates what Msila (2024) described as Janusian thinking. In these moments, challenges are reframed as opportunities to foster resilience and innovation, showing how women leaders actively navigate and reconfigure structural, cultural, and gendered barriers rather than merely responding to them.

The findings underscore the urgent need to interrogate existing leadership paradigms and intentionally harness the potential of women leaders in educational contexts. Persistent historical biases regarding women in leadership must be dismantled. The field cannot continue to reproduce studies that simply reaffirm these barriers without advancing actionable change. A shift in scholarly and institutional discourse is necessary. Researchers and practitioners must move beyond documenting challenges and instead, embrace a reconceptualisation of leadership that centres women's agency, foregrounds relational and values-driven practices, and aligns with a transformative vision for a more socially just educational system. Future research should explore how institutional and policy frameworks across African and international contexts can be strategically leveraged or reimagined to systematically support and sustain women's leadership in education, ensuring that structural and cultural constraints are addressed alongside individual adaptive strategies.

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# A pedagogical strategy towards bringing an end to coloniality in the Global South: A South African perspective

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## Abstract

Many of the former colonies that attained independence since the 1960s, including South Africa, are still suffering from a condition known as coloniality—an ingrained colonial mindset. South Africa represents a special case in this regard because it also suffered under apartheid for approximately five decades until 1994. Although measures have been taken to overcome the after-effects of colonisation and apartheid, South Africans must still contend with the condition of coloniality. They are not alone in this, however. The literature abounds with examples of coloniality among the inhabitants of the Global South. Based on an interpretivist-constructivist analysis, it is contended that the condition of coloniality can be overcome by following a two-pronged education strategy. The first step is to transform the education system and the school curriculum along the lines of de- or trans-coloniality and then to attend to what occurs at the ground level in classrooms. The latter implies, among other things, that teachers should be (re-)educated so that they will not only understand what coloniality means but also know how to counter it by applying appropriate didactical measures.

**Keywords:** coloniality, curriculum, decoloniality, education, education system, pedagogy, teacher education, trans-coloniality

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## Introduction

South Africa is part of the Global South and, hence, shares much of the fate of the countries of those parts of the globe—a loose grouping of countries in South America, Africa, and parts of Asia (Prashad, 2024). Unlike other former colonies, it displays a special brand of coloniality due to its unique history of colonialism, apartheid, and neocolonialism flowing from neoliberal policies. Its diverse and deeply divided citizenry is still grappling with coloniality, a phenomenon discussed in detail below.

During apartheid (1948–1994), a policy of segregation along racial or ethnic lines was enforced, which resulted in minimal contact between learners of various races or ethnic groups and led to the development of the deep divisions still existing among South Africans after three decades of democracy. The dismantling of racial, ethnic, and linguistic school segregation since 1994 has, to some extent, led to schools becoming more integrated and diverse (although with a tendency to adopt English as the language of teaching and learning; see de Lima Grecco & Schuster, 2020). What we find in schools in South Africa today, as Mignolo (2007) observed in another context, is that several simultaneous histories are represented, interconnected by imperial and colonial powers and backgrounds. The policy of accommodating learners from all races, ethnicities, and cultures in schools has, after three decades of implementation (1994–2024), not yielded the results that many non-white (“non-European”) South Africans had expected, as the following citations illustrate.

Jansen (2017, para. 7), based on the student uprisings in South Africa in the previous year, highlighted “the dehumanisation of black students by the current curriculum.” He found truth in their objection to studying “all these dead white men who presided over our oppression” and “a curriculum dominated by Western thought and ideas” (Jansen, 2017, para. 8). According to Magula and Phoshoko (2020), minor inclusions of African knowledge systems have done nothing to dismantle the Eurocentrism embedded in South African curricula. There is still a heavy reliance on Western culture, language, and ideology and on “the cognitive dominance that creates self-doubt for Africans, and the over-glorification of everything Western” (Magula & Phoshoko, 2020, p. 84). Mudau and Mtonga (2020) concurred by stating that marginalisation and social injustice are still deeply ingrained in South African society. Likewise, Magezi (2019) held the opinion that education in South Africa is still entangled with European theories and models that hardly relate to African students’ experiences. Baloyi (2020, p. 1) described coloniality in the pedagogical context of South Africa in the following terms:

Colonisation had succeeded in putting native people in a space where they are not what they want to be. Black people . . . have no longer been able to define or even identify with their real selves. . . . [This leads to] black self-hatred . . . that manifests itself in many forms in our daily lives.

Self-hatred has become “deeply entrenched” in the lives of the Black people of Africa; it is from within this black hatred that people “start despising their own culture and traditions” (Baloyi, 2020, p. 2). According to Magano (2018, 237), “the recent outcry in tertiary institutions on decolonizing the curriculum should be a wakeup call to education in general to look deeply into the

approach that we use whether [it speaks] to us as Africans.”

South Africans are not alone in lamenting about coloniality. Mignolo (2007, p. 158), a Latin American thinker, spoke of the “miseries of the colonial mentality” and of being “torn between the exemplarity of European modern states and the miseries of the (previously) colonised.” Many of the previously colonised are still “entangled, woven, trapped in the colonial matrix of power of the modern/colonial world” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 158). He also spoke of the “miseries of mentality” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 158), namely the feeling of being torn between the exemplarity of European modern states and the economic and political miseries of dependent colonial states. King (2013, p. 1), a descendant of a Black slave in the United States, declared: “I do not have a location or a vantage point from which to orient and understand myself. I do not yet have a language that would allow me to name myself or how I am situated.” She put her feelings in the following terms: “Repressive powers . . . make the Black body abject, fungible and situated at the outer limits of being-ness” (King, 2013, p. 1). Garcia (2019, p. 9), a Latin American student, has complained about the non-recognition of the work of Global South scholars: “Their scholarship and intellectual potency are seldom recognized by dominant Western canonical thought.” This epistemic erasure, absence, silencing, othering, and denial of their voices form part of “a larger colonial project, which has privileged a Eurocentric canon at the expense of non-European epistemological positions and worldviews” (Garcia, 2019, p. 10).

### **The research problem, research method, and structure of this article**

The seriousness and topicality of coloniality as a phenomenon were recently underscored by the fact that the ruling political party in South Africa, the African National Congress, sent a delegation in February 2024 to join 50 other delegations from across the Global South in a conference in Moscow aimed at “establishing an organisation that will be able to counter the domination of the West, and will work towards the eradication of neo-colonialism” (Willemse, 2024, p. 1). The purpose of the conference, according to convenor Andrei Klimof of the United Russia Party, was to discuss the “effects of neo-colonial practices across the globe”; in his opinion, neo-colonialism in the 21st century goes hand in hand with interference with countries’ sovereignties (as cited by Willemse, 2024).

The following two-pronged research question was formulated against this background: “What is coloniality, and how can it be overcome through changes to the education system and classroom didactics?” The aims of the research as reported in this article were to (a) determine the meaning of the term “coloniality,” (b) to theoretically examine the ramifications of coloniality, (c) to determine what overarching steps could be taken at the education system and curriculum level to assist educationists and educators (teachers) to counter coloniality, and (d) to outline some of the practical measures that could be considered for implementation in the classroom. An investigation into these issues was—and will remain for some time to come—necessary to help South Africans, and all other individuals and communities in the Global South afflicted by coloniality to overcome that condition. Interpretivism, combined with constructivism, was employed as the research

method. Every available piece of information, fact, or opinion regarding coloniality was interpreted to gain an understanding of coloniality as a phenomenon and its impact on education, in general, and teaching and learning in the classroom, in particular (cf. Caputo, 2018, p. 5). Constructivism, as the second element of the method, resulted in the construction of the argument unfolding below (cf. Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Leutwyler et al., 2012).

The four aims mentioned above are reflected in the structure of this article. The next section contains the conceptual and theoretical framework in respect of which the research was conducted. The section thereafter is devoted to a discussion of overarching measures that could be considered at the education system and national curriculum level, followed by a section concentrating on measures that could be introduced at the classroom or teaching–learning level.

## Conceptual and theoretical framework

### The term “coloniality”

Despite its possible limitations as a heuristic tool (de Lima Grecco & Schuster, 2020), the term “coloniality” has been widely used as a key concept in de- or post-colonisation studies. The word (from the Latin *colere*—to inhabit) was first used by González Casanova in 1965 in connection with internal colonialism, also referred to as “colonialism of the mind” (see wa Thiong’o, 1994, p. 392). Casanova used the term to explain how colonial structures kept on prevailing in previously colonial societies even after they had acquired independence. Coloniality is, as Ali (2016) explained, the residual sediment laid down in the minds of the formerly colonised people—an ongoing process of control by which a central system of power dominates others and their resources, including their mindset. It is an ongoing form of domination, a “variously and unconsciously interpellated identity,” according to King (2013, p. 5), a persistent condition that finds expression in cultural forms, practices, histories, and knowledge structures. Ribeiro (2023, p. 6) defined coloniality as “the persistence of structures after the formal end of colonialism.”

In de Lissovoy and Bailón’s (2019) opinion, coloniality has persisted to this day because of its relationship with, and organisation of, power. The notion of coloniality has enabled scholars to reflect on power, knowledge, and identity in both modernity (the mindset and thinking of the former colonisers) and in the former colonies. In their opinion, the idea of coloniality also “offers an essential and transformative framework for thinking through the problem of power in education” (de Lissovoy & Bailón, 2019, p. 94).

It is important to distinguish between colonialism (a social formation) and coloniality, which is “an encompassing political, cultural, epistemological, and symbolic condition” (de Lissovoy & Bailón, 2019, p. 84). The latter signifies power that is ontologically colonial in its origin. Coloniality denotes the colonial pattern of power regarding race, the control of labour, authority, sex, gender, and, important in the context of this paper, the control of subjectivity (how people see themselves—the colonialism of the mind—the coloniality of being and of knowing; de Lissovoy & Bailón, 2019). Coloniality is the myriad ways in which colonialism survives into the present,

including social formations such as that only knowledge based on Western-type epistemologies is supposed to be of any value (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). In sum, according to de Lissovoy and Bailón (2019), coloniality can be seen as a cultural matrix that enables the oppression, exploitation, and plunder of the Global South.

### **Understanding of coloniality affected by views about the two waves of colonialism**

Understanding of coloniality has, in some cases, been affected by an intermingling of two waves of colonialism. Some theorists on coloniality, such as Narayan (2017), Raworth (2022), and Prashad (2024), distinguished between the following two phases of colonialism: the classic first phase that commenced around the 1490s and ended in the 1960s when most former colonies attained political independence and the second, the neoliberal or neo-capitalist phase that commenced in the 1970s and still has an impact on the Global South. Neoliberalism, in Prashad's (2024, p. 1) opinion an "ideology of social cannibalism, [a] scorched earth policy," has devastated much of the Global South through programmes of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Narayan (2017, pp. 4–5), in the same vein, saw the United States of America as

an unprecedented form of imperial empire . . . that has transformed itself into a power controlling all the world's lands and people, seeking to integrate the world into one community of capitalist production and consumption.

Because of this global coloniality, the inhabitants of South Africa and elsewhere in the Global South "are today living under crude American/Euro-American exploitation and domination of capital on a world-scale" (Narayan, 2017, p. 4; also see de Lima Grecco & Schuster, 2020, p. 427). According to Raworth (2022, p. 63), the neoliberal economic plot has whipped us into a perfect storm of inequality, climate change and financial crash." The neoliberal script, she wrote, "has taken us to the brink of ecological, social and financial collapse" (Raworth, 2022, p. 70).

Other theorists, such as Mignolo (2007), Grosfoguel (2011), and de Lissovoy and Bailón (2019), treated the two phases of colonialism as a single instance of coloniality, that is, the persistent mindset of the subaltern. According to Grosfoguel (2011), the global structures put in place over 450 years of classic colonialism seem to have seamlessly morphed into the second wave of colonialism over the past 50 years. All that has happened, is that the Global South has moved "from a period of 'global colonialism' to the current period of 'global coloniality'" (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 14). Mignolo (2007, p. 159) agreed with him in stating that the colonial subalterns find themselves facing the "colonial wound inflicted by 500 years of historical modernity."

According to Grosfoguel (2011, p. 12), "we are all [today] encompassed within a capitalist world-system, with race and racism . . . constitutive of capitalist accumulation on a world-scale." Many of the countries in Africa and in the rest of the Global South have been robbed of their national wealth and resources in the past seven or so decades of neoliberalism at a world scale. The view of how power should be wielded by governments and large industrial corporations has become an organising principle involving exploitation and domination exercised in many dimensions of social life, from economic, sexual, or gender relations to political organisations,

structures of knowledge, state institutions (such as schools), and even households.

It should be kept in mind that capitalism and neoliberalism do not refer to economic affairs only; neoliberalism is “one of the multiple entangled constellations of [the] colonial power matrix” of the Global North-centred world system (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 13). Not only does the current state in which the inhabitants of the Global South find themselves mean having to live with capitalist exploitation and domination (by the Global North), but it also leads to the production of subjectivities (how the people of the Global South view themselves and their role and place in the world) and of knowledge (what knowledge can be regarded as true, valid, and valuable).

### **Theoretical framework**

According to Narayan (2017) and de Lissovoy and Bailón (2019), it is only possible to understand the notion of coloniality in terms of the *dependency theory*. The main thrust of this theory is to explain and critique how the nations and the inhabitants of the Global South were made historically and structurally dependent within a global centre–periphery logic (a colonial empire–colony logic). According to this theory, the underdevelopment of the Global South was economically designed to enrich the wealthy nations of the Global North.

The *theory of the power of context* explains other aspects of coloniality. It holds that people are “exquisitely sensitive” to the smallest details of their immediate situation (Gladwell, 2010, p. 29). As Strauss (2009) explained, all phenomena and situations, including coloniality, have a situational and social side, but also display other, non-social aspects of their experiential world, such as the economic, the cultural-historical, and, of particular significance in the present context, the ethical in the sense of social morality. Coloniality exists in a particular space—a spatio-temporal complexity of society (de Lima Grecco & Schuster, 2020)—namely among the inhabitants of the Global South. According to the literature on coloniality, the inhabitants of the Global South are feeling increasingly uncomfortable in their current space. They feel, as de Lissovoy and Bailón (2019) concluded, that they have been remade in the image of the Western bourgeois Man, as the other—either invisible, absent or a deficient human being. This realisation underscores the need for a special turn towards the inclusion of other spaces beyond the European (de Lima Grecco & Schuster, 2020).

An evaluation of the current space of the inhabitants of the Global South has ethical implications—among other things, their need to be recognised, as real people with voices, with their histories and humanity. Ethical action is required to restore their right to (co-)existence, respect, and reciprocity grounded in non-Western norms, values, and customs, if and where required. The entire process of decoloniality must, therefore, be based on an ethics of caring. For this purpose, a project of reframing should be launched: a decolonial project in which issues related to the marginalised other should be restructured to meet their needs and interests (Zamora, 2016).

## **Measures that could be introduced at the education system and national curriculum level to counteract coloniality as a mindset**

### **Orientation**

Decolonial, post-colonial, or post-imperial thinking has important implications for education and educational theory. A special strategy should be followed to bring about a change in the way in which the people of the Global South, including the South Africans of the future, currently sitting on the school benches, can hopefully overcome coloniality. Measures must be taken to terminate their dependency and the power imbalance associated with coloniality. A two-pronged ethics-based strategy is proposed in the remainder of this article to bring about such changes in their personal and social status: (1) an overarching strategy for change adopted by education system planners and by the designers of school curricula in South Africa and elsewhere in the Global South, and (2) another, flowing from the former, for implementation at classroom level.

It is important when thinking about a strategy for bringing about change, as Eboka (2022) has cautioned, not to attend only to superficial, tokenistic measures. There should be a true commitment to decolonise education in the Global South in the most profound sense of the word, that is, by changing learners' geo- and body politics: from dependence on Eurocentrism to a worldview that attests to the new balances outlined in the following sub-sections. Those suffering from coloniality should engage in the development of a new discourse that "emerges from the colonial wound" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 159). The restructuring of education must bring about an existential-ethical dialogue in education that reshapes the thoughts, ideas, and actions of the formerly colonised, in this case, learners. The following are the main features of such a strategy.

### **Adopting the peripheral perspective**

A decolonial critique of education, according to de Lissovoy and Bailón (2019), calls for a pedagogical project of reconstruction that begins outside of traditional pedagogy; it finds its starting point in the peripheries (i.e., the status quo of the inhabitants of the former colonies) but also involves the centre (the coloniser) when necessary. In essence, decolonial thinking, according to Mignolo (2007, p. 155), is "a particular kind of critical theory entailing a radical epistemic shift, away from the modernist (rationalist-European) thinking." It is, said Narayan (2017), revolutionary inter-communal thinking, a way of thinking that, on the one hand, resists the demands of global capitalism (neoliberalism, neo-capitalism) and, on the other, searches for alternative forms of life to the capitalist form of life, such as traditional community-based practices.

The first step in such an approach is to decide to think and act about coloniality from the peripheral perspective, in other words, from the perspective of an inhabitant of the Global South. This means that when one considers the notion of "development," for instance, this should not be done with reference to the neoliberal discourse of the Global North. According to the Global North discourse, development amounts to a colonial recipe on how to become like the West. In de Lissovoy and Bailón's (2019) opinion, thinking between peripheral sites may be indicated, that is, a way of

thinking that also accommodates differences among formerly colonised communities. This way of thinking makes audible the voices of those at the peripheries—the subalterns that find themselves outside the hegemonic centres (Ribeiro, 2023). Peripheral thinking should be the vantage point from which educationists and educators (teachers) ought to think about education (pedagogy and didactics).

### **Critical border thinking and de-linking**

Experiences with coloniality generate the need for border thinking (Mignolo, 2007). Critical border thinking and de-linking are forms of critical, transformative thinking that can bring about change in a current situation, among others by thinking along more traditional community-based lines. They redefine the rhetoric of modernity (Western-rationalistic thinking) from the perspective of the ontologies, cosmologies, and epistemologies of the subaltern (in this case, the inhabitants of the Global South)—those finding themselves in the borderlands of coloniality (Abdullah et al., 2019), especially those who feel oppressed and exploited. Critical border thinking ideally leads to a redefinition of citizenship, democracy, human rights, humanity, and economic relations beyond the narrow definitions thereof offered by neoliberal or neo-capitalist perspectives.

Critical border thinking is different from Western scientific thinking that tends to be disembodied, unlocated, universalist, supposedly generalisable, and intended to keep control of authority (de Lima Grecco & Schuster, 2020; Mignolo, 2007). Critical border and decolonial epistemologies emerge from the subjectivities (ways of being)—the experiences, religions, histories, cultures, and everyday life—of those who still suffer from or under coloniality. Metaphorically speaking, said Mignolo (2007, p. 164), critical border or decolonial thinking places itself on the “darker side” of modernity, against the weaknesses of the rationalism of modernity. This form of thinking, and decolonial projects in general, is a subaltern way of thinking about the so-called colonial wound inflicted by the imperial or colonial global expansion of Western capitalism (Mignolo, 2007). It is a way of thinking that is in line with a perspective voiced several decades ago by Gloria Anzaldúa (1999, p. 109): “Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the ‘real world’ unless it first happens in our heads.” In a sense, she echoed the classic Latin saying: *Animum mutat, non caelum* [Your spirit should change, not the heavens].

Grosfoguel (2011, pp 27, 29) gave an example of how border thinking might work:

Democracy needs to be reconceptualized in a transmodern form in order to be decolonized from liberal democracy, that is the Western racialized and capitalist-based form of democracy. . . . Communities, enterprises, schools, hospitals, and all of the institutions that currently regulate social life [should] be self-managed by people under the goal of extending social equality and democracy to all spaces of social existence.

Another name for critical border thinking that appears in the literature is de-linking: working at the fringes, at the border between Western-type dominant forms of knowledge, economic practices, and political demands. In some cases, this might mean using both the social system and the

curriculum but doing something else, namely countering coloniality (Mignolo, 2007).

### **Nested-hierarchical and pluriversal thinking**

South Africans, like all inhabitants of the Global South, cannot turn the clock back. The people of the Global South have suffered much from both waves of colonialism, but they have also benefitted from them in many ways. They cannot, as Anangisye (personal communication, July 23, 2019) correctly stated, summarily reject, as Majumder (2021) has done, the modern and globalised world and associate themselves with the Indigenous way of life, with an Indigenous episteme, or idealised and largely invented “neo-indigenismo” (de Lima Grecco & Schuster, 2020, p. 443). They should make the best of their Western heritage, and teach and learn what can be useful for them in their present circumstances and what would make good future citizens of them (also see Narayan, 2017). In this regard, one thinks of modern amenities and institutions such as Western-type schools, universities, communication, transport, computing, and industrial development (Ali, 2016). This is an “obstinate fact” that cannot be ignored (Prashad, 2023, para. 9).

The question for South Africans and other inhabitants of the Global South is how to overcome Eurocentric modernity without rejecting the best of modernity. The answer does not lie in either Eurocentrism or Afrocentrism (in the case of Africans), but rather in a meaningful and sensible compromise. The Western heritage must not be summarily rejected as a monolithic and totalizing colonial phenomenon. One should deal with it with subtlety, discretion, and nuance (Ribeiro, 2023). Those aspects of capitalism and other aspects of Western life and existence that are deemed to be advantageous to the former colonies should be reinterpreted (Grosfoguel, 2011). A stumbling block in this regard, as Anangisye (personal communication, July 23, 2019) pointed out, is the difficulty of deciding what would be reconcilable with the nature of a particular country and community because globalism has tended to smooth everything out.

The “changed” knowledge with which the inhabitants of the Global South must learn to live calls for engaging in a pluriversal project—a project that moves them beyond both Eurocentrism and Global South fundamentalism (such as calling for a return to the past or indigeneity; Grosfoguel, 2011; Jansen, 2017). It should help them develop a new view of human prosperity—as a flourishing web of life: seeking a balance between Western and Global South values and way of life (Raworth, 2022). This project will assist them in learning how to live and work in a pluriversal environment located at the intersection between the traditional (Indigenous) and the modern. A simplistic return to a romanticised (for instance, African) past, to Indigenous customs, cultures, and ways of thinking and doing, will not serve this purpose. In developing such changed knowledge and ways of doing, according to Grosfoguel (2011) and de Lima Grecco and Schuster (2020), the inhabitants of the Global South should engage in a subtle form of subversive complicity against the system currently dominated by the Global North world system.

Nested-hierarchical and pluriversal thinking may be the best way of thinking about coloniality, capitalism, and neoliberalism. Grosfoguel (2011, pp. 19–20) explained nested-hierarchical thinking as follows:

It is an attempt to conceptualize structures with a new language that breaks with the liberal paradigm of the nineteenth century social science, namely of structures as closed systems. It is better to define a historical system as a “nested hierarchy” . . . and to think in terms of a complexity, an open system, an entanglement of multiple and heterogeneous hierarchies, structural levels, and structuring logics, all within a single historical reality. Nested-hierarchical thinking provides a language for a new way of thinking about coloniality, and can contribute towards its eradication.

The aim should be to develop an ethical–political–pedagogical project towards a pluriversal as opposed to a universal world. It is important to understand, as Magano (2018, p. 236) emphasised, that Western-type and Indigenous theories, including teaching and learning theories, “speak to the teaching and learning context from a different world view” (p. 236). She advised that [South] “Africans must tap into their [Indigenous] epistemologies and see ways of life that coincide with [Western] psychology” and its interpretation of teaching and learning (Magano, 2018, p. 236).

A compromise should be sought between a Western approach to knowledge (modernistic-rationalistic, the search for generalisable, objective, individualistic, static, essentialist, ahistorical, disincorporated, delocalised knowledge; de Lima Grecco & Schuster, 2020) and (Southern) Afrocentric folk knowledge (holistic personal self-knowledge, based on communalism and collectivism). A new epistemology that does not ignore or denigrate the valuable aspects of Western knowledge, on the one hand, or those of Indigenous (African, Latin-American, as the case may be) knowledge, on the other, but forms a meaningful and sensible basis for teaching and learning should be developed in schools and tertiary institutions.

Because coloniality is about much more than just economics, education system planners and curriculum developers should be wary of economic reductionism, that is, the tendency to blame all the negatives in the Global South solely on the economic exploitation brought about by neoliberal policies. All factors that affect social existence in the Global South should be addressed through the education system, the curriculum, and teaching and learning in classrooms.

### **Taking account of the relevant geo- and body politics**

The social space theory discussed above shows that knowledges are always situated, and always developed from the vantage point of a particular positionality. Philosophers reflecting on coloniality refer to this as the *geopolitics and the body politics of the knowledge* of the person who looks at the problem and speaks about it. These two terms refer to the materiality of the situation: *who* is thinking and from *where* he or she is thinking. Materiality implies an engagement with the concrete and practical dimensions of epistemology in contrast to Eurocentric abstract and universalising epistemology (Ali, 2016). According to Grosfoguel (2011, p. 6), “the disembodied and unlocated neutrality and objectivity of the ego-politics of knowledge [i.e., the Western-man ‘point zero’ god’s-eye view] is a Western myth.” It is important to recognise and acknowledge the “coloniality of being” of those who follow a school programme or a curriculum. When planning a school programme or a curriculum, the planner should have an open eye for the other. This is required to avoid falling into the modern (Western rationalistic) trap of putting everything in a single temporal line (Mignolo, 2007) and to generalise. The solution is to look at the problem from

the geopolitics, body politics, and geo-history of knowledge of the subalterns (de Lima Grecco & Schuster, 2020)—the perspective of the inhabitants of the Global South—and not to give privilege to the Western way of life or thinking. This approach could yield a better understanding of the materiality, social context, and location of knowledge.

### **A better understanding of our relationship with nature and the ecology**

It is, furthermore, important for education system planners and curriculum designers to possess the knowledge and insight that the Western concept of *nature* (as a means towards an end), with its tendency to exploit both human and non-human life, must be replaced by a view of nature and the ecology in which the cosmos is seen as an end in itself and, hence, important for the extension and reproduction of life (Grosfoguel, 2011). Young people should learn that the human being, rather than presiding at the pinnacle of nature's pyramid, is woven deep into nature's web; people are embedded in the living world, not separate from or above it. They should learn to care and act, not just for themselves but also for other people and in the interests of the entire ecosystem in which economic activities take place. To achieve this, eco-literacy must be taught in schools (Raworth, 2022). The prevailing view of the human being as *homo economicus*—the rational economic human being with insatiable wants and desires—should be replaced with a “hologram of humanity” (Raworth, 2022, p. 282). Balance is also required here; educationists and educators should avoid, for instance, falling into the trap of Rousseauian romanticism (Ridley, 1996).

### **A strategy for possible implementation in the classroom**

The overarching strategy discussed above should linger in the back of South African (and other Global South) educators' (teachers') minds when they interact with their learners in teaching about coloniality. This is important, as Abdullah et al. (2019) have observed, because the theory and practice of schooling, as a whole, are not geared towards delivering the kind of knowledge and understanding that are adequate for addressing longstanding systemic issues of power, including the power associated with coloniality. This, in their opinion, is the case in both the developed and the developing world. They correctly argued that the best way to address this problem is to transform the curriculum and the classroom practice ontologically, rather than through mere additive change; in other words, radical systemic change should be carried out, and not superficial and cosmetic change by bringing only some Indigenous elements into the teaching–learning situation. In line with what has been said above regarding the overarching strategy, teaching–learning situations should be planned that advance the ecological, social, and technological conditions where multiple worlds and knowledges involving both the human and the non-human world can flourish in mutually beneficial ways. There will always be a mainstream discourse in education that makes it possible for educationists and educators to engage with their colleagues in other parts of the world, but provision should also be made to listen to the voices from the peripheries, the margins, or fringes of mainstream society. This is in line with the idea expressed above of a dialogue among the peripheries and between the peripheries and the (mainstream) centre.

Decolonial education is based on a worldview constituted from multiple sites of enunciation, pre-eminently those situated at the margins of the world system (Ali, 2016). The following practical measures, in no specific order of importance or relevance, could be considered for helping learners to understand and master such a worldview:

- Teachers should try to find a neat balance in the form of an intersectional frame between the non-Western way of looking at human relationships and the dominant modernist, Western way of looking at life, people, and society (Eboka, 2022; Magezi, 2019; Mudau & Mtonga, 2020). Simplistic dichotomies, such as exploiters versus the exploited, centre versus periphery, North versus South, White versus Black, and settler versus native, should be avoided and replaced with precise and nuanced analyses, with examples from daily life.
- Discussions can be held with learners about power (relations), local, national, and international power structures (Ribeiro, 2023), oppression, and marginalisation as phenomena; the different forms of social oppression and social violence; capitalism and neoliberalism as forms of violence; systems of oppression in general (the overall issue of understanding one's geo- and body politics); and the impact of all these phenomena on the lives of people in the surrounding community.
- Discussions can also be conducted about social systems and structures, value systems, inequalities, and discrimination among learners in the classroom and society in general; situations characterised by a-social phenomena should be avoided and critiqued. The curriculum, according to Jansen (2017), should be strengthened and broadened with knowledge from the Global South that focuses on the local conditions of the learners.
- The issue of non-participation and exclusiveness can also be addressed; some learners feel marginalised and withdraw from activities (the overall issue of understanding one's subjectivity or way of being in the world), and they should be guided and assisted to participate in school and social life after school.
- Teachers should master the thinking behind ontologies of discrimination, among other things, sexism and racism, and apply their knowledge in this regard in their classrooms.
- Teachers should know when a modernist way of thinking about a subject (the Western way of thinking) is more appropriate than the local way of thinking about things, and vice versa. It will not serve the purpose of decoloniality if the teacher follows an epistemology of opposition, namely seeing the relationship between Western modernism and traditional thinking as a "paradigm war, as a world view based on opposite understandings of how human beings should live on earth," as Majumder (2021, p. 4) advised. This does not mean, however, that Indigenous ideas regarding survival, lifestyle, violence, or power should be discounted.
- Teachers should be aware of issues surrounding capitalism, neoliberalism, and neo-capitalism and how they could lead to the plunder of resources to the advantage of the more powerful and to the exploitation of labour. They should be able to draw their learners' attention to these conditions in a balanced and justifiable manner.

- Teachers should be aware of how coloniality works through economies as well as through immaterial areas, such as being, knowing, and culture, and apply this knowledge and insight where relevant when teaching.
- Issues of identity and identification and how to launch and maintain projects for self-reliance, such as ujamaa or co-existence, and cooperation, such as ubuntu, can be tabled during lessons.
- Teachers should be cautious during assessment and evaluation; they should avoid the tendency to reduce teaching–learning outcomes to numbers, productivity, and performance criteria.
- A key aspect of education for de- or post-coloniality is to show compassion, empathy, sympathy, and reciprocity, all of which are based on an ethic of caring (Koonce, 2018). The teacher should ensure that their classroom is a safe and accommodating environment. It is also important for the teacher to think about what it might mean for those among the learners who find themselves at the peripheries of the world system and assist them in escaping from it. Issues such as the asymmetries of power should be discussed with sensitivity (de Lima Grecco & Schuster, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The research reported in this article resulted from a two-pronged research question: “What is coloniality, and how can it be overcome through changes to the education system and classroom didactics?” The aim of the research, as stated above, was to (a) determine the meaning of the term “coloniality,” (b) to theoretically examine the ramifications of coloniality, (c) to determine what overarching steps could be taken at the education system and curriculum level to assist educationists and educators (teachers) to counter coloniality, and (d) to outline some of the practical measures that could be considered for implementation in the classroom. The discussion following the statement of the research question revealed—as regards aims (a) and (b)—that educators should possess a clear understanding of the term “coloniality” as well as all the effects flowing from the mindset referred to as coloniality. These include, according to the theory expounded above, the dependency that people in South Africa and elsewhere in the Global South still feel on dominant Global North theory and practice, the Global South context in which teaching and learning takes place, or should take place, and the fact that in whatever transformations are considered and effected, an ethics of care should figure prominently.

With respect to aims (c) and (d), it was discovered that although South African and other Global South schools and educators (teachers) work within the parameters of national and provincial education system guidelines and a prescribed national curriculum, their work as professionals should always be contextually appropriate for the community in which they practise their profession. In doing so, they enable the learners and the community to take ownership of the learning material in their context. Learning material should be relevant and appealing to the learners, their parents or caretakers, and the community of which they are members. Such a new

orientation will not occur overnight because education has a reputation for changing rather slowly, if at all. Despite the typical inertia of education, measures should be instituted to help the citizens of the future overcome their dependence on Eurocentric thinking, have a better understanding of the dynamics of social power and of their own geo- and body politics, subjectivity and positionality, and be able to demonstrate ethical care and respect to those who still endure the bane of coloniality.

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**Southern African Comparative and History of Education Society**

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