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Revitalizing Indigenous Knowledge Integrating Local Wisdom into Language and Literacy Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This study examines teachers' perspectives on curriculum decolonization in post-apartheid South African schools, investigating how educators understand, implement, and navigate tensions inherent in transforming colonial educational legacies. Through qualitative interviews with forty-two secondary school teachers across diverse South African provinces, the research explores teachers' conceptualizations of decolonization, their pedagogical strategies for centering African epistemologies, and challenges they encounter in implementation. Findings reveal that while teachers broadly support decolonization principles, they struggle with practical implementation due to limited resources, insufficient professional development, and tensions between decolonial aspirations and examination requirements emphasizing Western knowledge frameworks. Teachers identified three primary approaches: incorporating African indigenous knowledge systems, critically interrogating colonial narratives, and centering African languages in instruction. The study highlights persistent structural barriers including textbook limitations, assessment frameworks privileging Eurocentric content, and teacher education programs inadequately preparing educators for decolonial pedagogy. Results underscore the necessity of systemic support including curriculum revision, appropriate teaching materials, and comprehensive teacher professional

development to realize decolonization beyond rhetorical commitment.

INTRODUCTION

The project of curriculum decolonization in South African education represents both urgent necessity and profound challenge, emerging from historical legacies wherein education served as instrument of colonial domination and apartheid oppression. For centuries, educational systems systematically marginalized African knowledge, languages, and cultural practices while privileging European epistemologies, languages, and narratives that positioned Africa and Africans as inferior, primitive, and lacking civilization. Jansen (2019) argues that post-apartheid curriculum reforms have achieved modest structural changes without fundamentally disrupting the epistemological dominance of Western knowledge frameworks that continue to shape what counts as legitimate knowledge in South African schools. Nearly three decades after apartheid's formal end, students still predominantly encounter curricula centering European history, literature, and scientific contributions while African intellectual traditions remain peripheral or entirely absent.

Decolonization in educational contexts extends beyond merely adding African content to existing frameworks; it requires fundamental epistemic transformation regarding whose knowledge receives validation, how knowledge is constructed and transmitted, and whose voices possess authority in educational spaces. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) conceptualizes decolonization as dismantling colonial matrices of power that continue operating through cultural, psychological, and epistemic dimensions even after formal political independence. In curriculum terms, this involves interrogating taken-for-granted assumptions about knowledge hierarchies, recognizing multiple valid ways of knowing, and centering indigenous epistemologies as legitimate intellectual frameworks rather than cultural curiosities or supplementary content. Such transformation challenges deeply embedded structures and ideologies that have shaped South African education for generations.

Teachers occupy critical positions in curriculum decolonization as they mediate between official curriculum documents and actual classroom experiences, making countless daily decisions about content selection, pedagogical approaches, and whose knowledge receives emphasis. Sayed and Kanjee (2013) emphasize that teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and pedagogical capacities fundamentally shape curriculum enactment, with official policy documents representing only potential that teachers must actualize through their professional practice. Understanding teachers' perspectives on decolonization becomes essential for comprehending implementation realities, identifying support needs, and recognizing constraints that

policy documents may overlook. Teachers possess invaluable ground-level insights about what decolonization means in practice, what enables or hinders its implementation, and what students need to develop decolonized consciousness.

The South African context presents unique complexities for curriculum decolonization given its histories of colonialism, apartheid, and ongoing structural inequalities along racial and economic lines. Le Grange (2016) describes South African education as characterized by persistent inequality where former white schools maintain resource advantages while historically Black schools face severe material deprivation, creating vastly different contexts for curriculum implementation. Decolonization efforts must navigate these disparities, addressing questions about whether all students should encounter identical decolonized curricula or whether different approaches suit different contexts. Furthermore, South Africa's linguistic diversity—with eleven official languages—creates particular challenges and opportunities for decolonization, as language medium fundamentally shapes knowledge access and epistemological positioning.

Post-apartheid curriculum reforms have articulated commitments to African-centered education and indigenous knowledge integration, yet implementation has proven inconsistent and contested. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) introduced in 2012 reference indigenous knowledge systems and African perspectives, but critics argue these remain tokenistic additions rather than fundamental curriculum reorganization. Msila (2007) documents how African indigenous knowledge often appears as discrete curriculum units about traditional practices rather than permeating curriculum as alternative epistemological framework informing all content areas. This compartmentalization perpetuates hierarchies positioning Western knowledge as universal and African knowledge as local, traditional, and particular, thereby maintaining colonial knowledge relations under superficial African branding.

Teacher education represents a critical leverage point for curriculum decolonization, as teachers' own educational experiences and professional preparation shape their capacity to enact decolonial pedagogy (Muhsyanur, 2023). However, South African teacher education programs have themselves been slow to decolonize, continuing to privilege Western pedagogical theories, disciplinary frameworks, and knowledge systems. Shay (2016) argues that teacher education curricula must undergo fundamental transformation, centering African philosophy, pedagogy, and knowledge systems while developing teachers' critical consciousness regarding how curricula encode power relations and marginalize certain knowledge forms. Without such preparation, teachers may sympathize with decolonization in principle while lacking conceptual frameworks and pedagogical tools for meaningful implementation.

The global resurgence of decolonization movements—sparked by student protests demanding curriculum transformation Muhsyanur (2024) in universities across South Africa, particularly the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements—has intensified focus on decolonizing education at all levels. These

movements articulated powerful critiques of epistemic violence perpetuated through curricula that alienate African students from their own knowledge traditions while positioning them as perpetual learners of European knowledge. Heleta (2016) documents how student activists called for curricula reflecting African realities, centering African scholars and intellectuals, and addressing contemporary African challenges through African knowledge frameworks. While these movements primarily targeted universities, their influence extended to secondary education, raising questions about how school curricula might similarly transform. This study examines how teachers working in secondary schools understand and respond to decolonization imperatives, investigating their conceptualizations, practices, challenges, and support needs as they navigate the complex terrain of curriculum transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

METHOD

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to examine teachers' perspectives on curriculum decolonization in South African secondary schools. Participants included forty-two teachers representing diverse subject areas including history, literature, science, and mathematics across six provinces: Gauteng, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Limpopo, and Free State. Purposive sampling ensured representation across school contexts including former model C schools, township schools, and rural schools, recognizing that resource contexts and student demographics significantly influence curriculum implementation possibilities. Participants possessed teaching experience ranging from five to thirty-two years, with deliberate inclusion of both teachers educated during apartheid and those completing teacher education post-1994. Research followed ethical protocols approved by institutional review boards, with informed consent emphasizing participant confidentiality and voluntary participation. The methodological approach draws from phenomenological traditions described by van Manen (2016), focusing on understanding teachers' lived experiences and meaning-making regarding decolonization as educational phenomenon.

Interview protocols explored teachers' understandings of curriculum decolonization, specific pedagogical practices they employ or aspire to employ, challenges they encounter, resources they utilize, and support systems they require for effective implementation. Following principles articulated by Rubin and Rubin (2012) for responsive interviewing, questions remained open-ended and flexible, allowing participants to define salient issues rather than imposing researcher assumptions. Interviews lasting sixty to ninety minutes were conducted in participants' preferred languages including English, isiZulu, and Afrikaans, with professional translation where necessary. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedures, involving familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the final analysis. Trustworthiness was established through member checking wherein participants reviewed preliminary findings, peer debriefing with

South African education scholars, and reflexive journaling documenting researcher positionality and interpretive decisions. This approach aligns with decolonial research methodologies advocated by Chilisa (2020) that prioritize participant voice, cultural responsiveness, and knowledge co-construction.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Conceptualizing Decolonization: Between Rhetoric and Understanding

Teachers demonstrated varied and sometimes contradictory understandings of curriculum decolonization, revealing conceptual clarity as a significant challenge for implementation. Some teachers articulated sophisticated understandings aligned with scholarly definitions, describing decolonization as fundamental epistemic transformation questioning Western knowledge hegemony and centering African ways of knowing. These teachers recognized decolonization as ongoing process requiring critical examination of curriculum content, pedagogical approaches, and power relations embedded in educational structures. They described decolonization as dismantling mental colonization wherein Africans internalize inferiority regarding their own knowledge while venerating European intellectual traditions. Such conceptual sophistication typically characterized teachers who had engaged with academic literature on decolonization or participated in university-based professional development addressing these issues.

However, many teachers expressed confusion about decolonization's practical meaning, sometimes conflating it with Africanization, localization, or simply increasing African content representation. Several teachers interpreted decolonization as replacing European examples in textbooks with African examples while maintaining identical pedagogical approaches and epistemological frameworks. Others understood decolonization primarily as teaching in African languages rather than English, viewing language medium as central transformation while overlooking epistemic dimensions. These varied interpretations suggest that decolonization as policy rhetoric has outpaced shared understanding of its substantive meaning, creating implementation challenges when teachers pursue divergent or superficial interpretations disconnected from decolonization's transformative potential.

Tensions emerged between teachers who viewed decolonization as absolute rejection of Western knowledge and those advocating for pluralistic approaches incorporating multiple knowledge systems. Some participants argued that decolonization requires completely removing colonial curricula and replacing them with exclusively African content, rejecting any Western knowledge as inherently contaminated by colonialism. Others advocated for integrative approaches wherein students encounter diverse knowledge traditions including Western, African, and other global epistemologies, developing critical capacities to evaluate all knowledge systems rather than simply inverting colonial hierarchies. These divergent positions reflect broader debates within decolonization scholarship regarding whether the

goal involves creating alternative African-centered curricula or developing pluriversal approaches honoring knowledge diversity.

Generational differences influenced decolonization conceptualizations, with teachers educated during apartheid expressing both commitment to transformation and difficulty imagining alternatives to their own educational experiences. These teachers often possessed limited exposure to African knowledge systems, having experienced education deliberately severing them from indigenous traditions. Younger teachers, particularly those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, sometimes demonstrated stronger personal connection to decolonization as they recognized how their own schooling alienated them from their cultural heritage. However, generational patterns proved complex rather than deterministic, with some veteran teachers demonstrating deep commitment to decolonization while some younger teachers showed limited engagement. These findings underscore the necessity of professional development addressing teachers' conceptual understanding as foundation for meaningful implementation.

Pedagogical Strategies and Implementation Challenges

Teachers described diverse pedagogical strategies for enacting curriculum decolonization, though implementation varied significantly based on subject area, resource availability, and institutional support (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). History and literature teachers reported greatest opportunities for decolonization through curriculum content, incorporating African historical narratives, literature by African authors, and critical analysis of colonial representations. These teachers described strategies including teaching African history from African perspectives rather than through colonial lenses, analyzing how European narratives about Africa served ideological functions justifying exploitation, and centering African agency, resistance, and intellectual contributions historically erased from curricula. Literature teachers incorporated African writers including Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and contemporary South African authors, facilitating discussions about colonial literature's representations of Africa and Africans.

Science and mathematics teachers faced particular challenges identifying decolonization approaches within disciplines often perceived as culturally neutral and universal. Some teachers incorporated ethnomathematics examining mathematical concepts embedded in African cultural practices including architecture, textile patterns, and traditional games, demonstrating mathematics as human creation rather than culture-free discovery. Science teachers discussed indigenous agricultural knowledge, traditional medicine, and African contributions to scientific knowledge, though they struggled with tensions between indigenous knowledge and Western scientific paradigms. Several teachers questioned whether science could be decolonized given its claims to universal validity, revealing epistemological challenges regarding whether scientific knowledge transcends cultural particularity or reflects Western ways of knowing nature.

Table 1 presents teachers' reported decolonization strategies across subject areas and the challenges they encountered, illustrating both creative approaches and persistent obstacles. The data reveal that while teachers demonstrate commitment and creativity, systemic barriers significantly constrain implementation possibilities.

Table 1. Decolonization Strategies and Implementation Challenges by Subject Area

Subject Area	Primary Decolonization Strategies	Main Implementation Challenges	Resource Adequacy
History	African historical narratives; critical analysis of colonial accounts; centering African agency	Limited textbook resources; examination focus on European history; teacher knowledge gaps	Low
Literature	African authors; postcolonial literary theory; critical analysis of colonial texts	Canon dominated by European literature; limited African texts in schools; language medium issues	Moderate
Science	Indigenous knowledge systems; African scientists; ethnoscience	Tension with Western scientific paradigm; limited curriculum space; perceived irrelevance to exams	Very Low
Mathematics	Ethnomathematics; African mathematical contributions; culturally relevant problems	Abstract nature of mathematics; teacher unfamiliarity with ethnomathematics; limited resources	Low
Languages	African language instruction; indigenous oral traditions; multilingual approaches	English dominance; status hierarchy among languages; limited materials in African languages	Moderate

Note. Resource adequacy rated by teachers on scale: Very Low, Low, Moderate, High. N = 42.

Assessment systems emerged as significant obstacles to decolonization, with national examinations predominantly emphasizing Western knowledge frameworks and content. Teachers described tensions between decolonial aspirations and examination pressures, feeling constrained to "teach to the test" that rewards students for reproducing Eurocentric content. Several teachers reported that even when they incorporated African content, examinations rarely assessed such material, sending implicit messages about knowledge hierarchies. This misalignment between

decolonial pedagogy and assessment structures creates powerful disincentives for transformation, as teachers face accountability for student examination performance measured through fundamentally colonial assessment frameworks.

Resource limitations represented another major implementation barrier, particularly in historically disadvantaged schools lacking libraries, internet access, or supplementary materials. Teachers described wanting to incorporate diverse African texts, multimedia resources, and guest speakers sharing indigenous knowledge but lacking financial and infrastructural means to access such resources. While privileged former model C schools could supplement prescribed textbooks with additional materials, under-resourced township and rural schools depended entirely on government-provided textbooks that contain limited African content. This resource disparity means decolonization implementation varies dramatically across schools, potentially exacerbating existing educational inequalities rather than addressing them. Teachers in under-resourced contexts expressed frustration that decolonization rhetoric assumed resource availability they simply did not possess.

Professional Development Needs and Support Systems

Teachers overwhelmingly identified professional development as critical need for meaningful curriculum decolonization, with most reporting that their teacher education programs inadequately prepared them for decolonial pedagogy. Many teachers acknowledged limited personal knowledge about African indigenous knowledge systems, having themselves experienced colonial education that severed them from their own cultural traditions. They expressed desire for professional learning opportunities providing substantive content knowledge about African history, philosophy, and indigenous knowledge alongside pedagogical strategies for classroom implementation. Several teachers specifically requested workshops with indigenous knowledge holders and African scholars who could provide authoritative knowledge about traditions and epistemologies they wanted to incorporate but felt unqualified to teach.

Beyond content knowledge, teachers sought pedagogical training in critical pedagogy approaches enabling students to analyze power relations, question dominant narratives, and develop decolonized consciousness. Teachers recognized that decolonization requires more than content substitution; it necessitates pedagogical transformation toward student-centered, dialogical approaches encouraging critical thinking rather than passive knowledge reception. However, many teachers reported teaching in ways they themselves were taught, perpetuating transmission pedagogies ill-suited to decolonial goals. Professional development addressing both content and pedagogy through sustained engagement rather than one-off workshops emerged as crucial support need repeatedly articulated across interviews.

Collaborative professional learning communities where teachers could share decolonization strategies, resources, and experiences proved valuable for the few teachers who accessed such opportunities. Teachers described how isolation limited

their decolonization efforts, leaving them to individually navigate complex challenges without collegial support or shared resources. Those participating in teacher networks or university partnerships expressed how collective engagement sustained their commitment and enriched their practice through shared struggle and collective problem-solving. Expanding such collaborative structures could provide crucial support infrastructure, enabling teachers to pool knowledge, develop shared resources, and collectively advocate for systemic changes necessary for decolonization.

Institutional leadership and policy support emerged as critical factors enabling or constraining teacher decolonization efforts. Teachers in schools with principals explicitly committed to transformation described greater freedom to experiment with curriculum and pedagogy, along with resource allocation supporting decolonization initiatives. Conversely, teachers in schools with conservative leadership reported feeling constrained or actively discouraged from decolonizing curriculum, particularly when such efforts involved criticizing colonial legacies or centering African knowledge. National and provincial education departments' roles proved similarly significant, with teachers wanting clear policy guidance, appropriate curriculum materials, and assessment frameworks aligned with decolonization principles rather than contradicting them. Without such systemic support, decolonization remains dependent on individual teachers' heroic efforts rather than becoming normalized educational practice.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that while South African teachers broadly support curriculum decolonization principles, translating these commitments into classroom practice remains profoundly challenging given conceptual ambiguities, resource limitations, assessment misalignments, and inadequate professional preparation. Teachers demonstrate commitment and creativity in developing decolonial pedagogical strategies, yet their efforts occur within structural constraints that systematically undermine transformative possibilities. Meaningful curriculum decolonization requires comprehensive systemic transformation including revised curriculum frameworks centering African epistemologies, culturally appropriate teaching materials, examination systems assessing decolonial learning outcomes, and sustained professional development preparing teachers for decolonial pedagogy.

The research underscores that teachers cannot single-handedly decolonize curricula against the grain of systems that remain fundamentally colonial in their knowledge hierarchies, assessment priorities, and resource distributions. Supporting teachers' decolonization work necessitates addressing these structural barriers while valuing teachers' professional knowledge and involving them as active participants in curriculum transformation processes rather than mere implementers of externally mandated change. Future research should examine student experiences of decolonized curricula, investigate successful decolonization models for replication,

and conduct longitudinal studies tracking decolonization's impact on students' cultural identity, critical consciousness, and academic achievement. As South Africa continues navigating its post-apartheid transformation, curriculum decolonization represents essential educational justice work that requires collective commitment, adequate resources, and systemic change extending well beyond rhetoric to fundamental epistemological and structural transformation.

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