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Decolonial Pedagogies and Africanisation in TVET: A Critical Examination of the NCV Curriculum in South Africa

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Abstract

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in South Africa is often framed as a technocratic response to unemployment and economic exclusion. The National Certificate, Vocational (NCV) was introduced to position vocational education as a pathway to social and economic inclusion for historically marginalised youth. However, within a context shaped by coloniality and persistent inequality, questions remain about whose knowledges and experiences are legitimised through the NCV curriculum. Drawing on decolonial theory, this paper conceptualises the NCV as a contested site of power, knowledge, and social possibility. A qualitative case study of two TVET colleges in KwaZulu-Natal is used to examine how colonial epistemic logics are reproduced, negotiated, and occasionally disrupted through curriculum design, pedagogical practices, and students lived experiences. Using decolonising methods including focus groups, collaborative storytelling, collages, and metaphor drawings, the study foregrounds marginalised voices and positions research as a potentially dialogical and transformative practice. Findings reveal a persistent disjuncture between the NCV's emancipatory policy intentions and its enactment. Despite policy commitments to responsiveness, the curriculum remains shaped by Eurocentric knowledge forms, constrained pedagogical agency, and weak alignment with local realities. The paper argues that reclaiming vocational learning requires a shift toward decolonial praxis that rehumanises and affirms vocational students as epistemic agents and co-creators of socially just futures.

Keywords: TVET; Decolonial Pedagogy; Africanisation; NCV; Epistemic Justice.

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Introduction

Across the Global South, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) has gained renewed policy prominence as a mechanism for addressing youth unemployment, skills shortages, and economic marginalisation (Allais, 2022). In South Africa, this prominence is deeply entangled with the country's historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid, which systematically devalued African knowledges while racialising access to skills, labour, and economic participation (Adeate & Sewchurran, 2023; Govender & Naidoo, 2023). The introduction of the National Certificate, Vocational (NCV) in 2007 represented a significant attempt to reimagine vocational education as a credible, inclusive, and socially responsive pathway for youth who had been historically excluded from formal academic schooling pathways (Buthelezi et al., 2024; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013).

Despite these intentions, critiques of the NCV point to persistent challenges in relevance, curriculum coherence, student throughput, and labour-market articulation (Allais, 2022; Gamble, 2022). Further, existing research has primarily focused on issues of student throughput, curriculum coherence, and labour-market responsiveness (Allais, 2022; Gamble, 2022; Powell et al., 2025). Comparatively little attention has been paid to the epistemic foundations of vocational curricula and the representation of African and Indigenous knowledge systems within TVET education (Govender & Naidoo, 2023; Msila, 2023). As a result, limited understanding exists regarding how the NCV curriculum might reproduce or challenge colonial forms of knowledge and power. This study addresses that gap by examining the extent to which decolonial and African-centred perspectives are reflected in the NCV curriculum.

Guided by questions of Africanisation and decolonial pedagogy, the paper asks: "How are African philosophies, Indigenous knowledges, and community-grounded ways of knowing represented or not represented within the NCV curriculum and its enactment?" "What could Ubuntu-informed vocational pedagogy look like in practice within TVET colleges?" "And, how might vocational curricula be reimagined to affirm vocational students as epistemic agents rather than passive recipients of technical skills?" (Govender & Naidoo, 2023; Msila, 2023; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework: Decoloniality, Coloniality of Knowledge, and Epistemic Injustice

This study adopts decoloniality as its overarching theoretical framework to interrogate the persistence of colonial power in contemporary knowledge systems, particularly within the TVET sector. Decoloniality critically examines the enduring legacies of colonialism in knowledge systems, institutional practices, and power relations (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). In the TVET sector, it is especially significant because it challenges the dominance of Eurocentric curricula and pedagogical approaches while creating space for Indigenous, local, and contextually relevant knowledge forms (Moosavi, 2023). In doing so, it supports the development of more inclusive, socially just, and responsive TVET systems aligned with local realities, labour market needs, and broader developmental objectives. More broadly, decoloniality offers a critical lens for examining how colonial domination continues to shape knowledge production, institutional arrangements, and power relations. Central to this perspective is Quijano's (2000) concept of the coloniality of power, which describes enduring patterns of domination embedded in social, political, and epistemic systems that continue to privilege Eurocentric ways of knowing.

Building on this, Mignolo (2011) argues that modernity is inseparable from coloniality because Western epistemologies were historically constituted through colonial expansion and continue to assert themselves as universal. Similarly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018, 2025) advances the concept of epistemic freedom, calling for the dismantling of Eurocentric dominance and the enabling of epistemic plurality. From this perspective, decoloniality moves beyond inclusion toward a fundamental

reconfiguration of the structures and hierarchies that underpin knowledge production (Mbembe, 2021).

To avoid abstraction, this study operationalises decoloniality through two complementary analytical tools: coloniality of knowledge and epistemic injustice. Coloniality of knowledge offers a structural lens for examining how epistemic hierarchies are institutionalised. Rooted in Quijano (2007), it describes the enduring dominance of Western epistemological frameworks, which are positioned as universal while marginalising indigenous and local knowledges (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu & Woldegiorgis, 2024). These hierarchies are reproduced through institutional mechanisms such as curricula, research practices, and academic publishing, as well as through the dominance of colonial languages that shape access to and validation of knowledge (Chilisa, 2019; Mbembe, 2021). In the South African context, this has direct implications for curriculum transformation in TVET, where imported frameworks often fail to align with local socio-economic realities (Allais & Wedekind, 2020; Tabulawa, 2013).

While coloniality of knowledge captures the structural dimension, epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) enables analysis at the level of lived experience by showing how individuals are undermined in their capacity as knowers through testimonial injustice (credibility deficits) and hermeneutical injustice (gaps in interpretive resources). In TVET contexts, this may manifest as the marginalisation of students from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds, while hermeneutical injustice arises when curricula fail to provide adequate conceptual tools to interpret lived realities (Pohlhaus, 2017).

Epistemic injustice is produced within broader conditions of coloniality. Coloniality of knowledge provides the structural conditions that enable these injustices, while epistemic injustice reveals their everyday manifestations. Together, they support a multi-layered analysis that links systemic power relations to lived experiences of exclusion.

Recent scholarship further demonstrates an emerging convergence between epistemic injustice theory and decolonial approaches grounded in coloniality, enabling integrated analyses of knowledge marginalisation in education systems (Asea, 2022; Cardona, 2022; Herr, 2025).

In sum, decoloniality is employed as the overarching framework, operationalised through coloniality of knowledge and epistemic injustice as complementary analytical tools. This integrated approach enables a rigorous interrogation of both structural and experiential dimensions of epistemic marginalisation, while supporting Africanisation and curriculum transformation. It provides a coherent basis for examining how TVET knowledge systems can be reoriented toward greater inclusivity, contextual relevance, and social justice.

Africanisation

Africanisation in this study is conceptualised as a context-specific articulation of the broader decolonial project, grounded in both theory and South Africa's transformation policy agenda (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). While decoloniality critiques global epistemic hierarchies, Africanisation centres African histories, identities, languages, and knowledge systems within curricula and institutional practices (Msila, 2023; Sebola & Mogoboya, 2020).

Within this policy context, Africanisation moves beyond symbolic inclusion to challenge the structural dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies (Chilisa, 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). It aligns with national priorities on curriculum transformation, epistemic access, and social justice, particularly in the TVET sector, where responsiveness to local realities is central (Makokotlela & Gumbo, 2025; Msila, 2023). However, recent scholarship points to a persistent gap between policy intent and practice, with many TVET students still excluded from meaningful epistemic participation (Majola, 2025; Majola et al., 2025).

Through the lenses of coloniality of knowledge and epistemic injustice, Africanisation can be understood as both a normative and practical response to epistemic marginalisation. It confronts the

privileging of Western knowledge while addressing the everyday exclusion of African knowers, positioning it as a transformative project aligned with national goals of redress, equity, and relevance (Sebola & Mogoboya, 2020).

This position is consistent with earlier critiques by Tabulawa (2013), who highlights the limitations of transplanting Western pedagogies into African contexts without sufficient contextual adaptation. He shows how such models produce pedagogical disjuncture, disconnecting teaching and learning from students' lived realities. Africanisation thus emerges not only as an ideological commitment but as a pedagogical imperative, restoring contextual relevance and epistemic alignment by foregrounding locally grounded ways of knowing. In the TVET sector, this is particularly critical for developing responsive, contextually relevant vocational education.

Research Design and Methodology

The study employed a qualitative case study design situated within a critical paradigm. It was conducted at two public TVET colleges in KwaZulu-Natal, purposively selected for their diverse student populations and the provision of NCV programmes across multiple vocational fields. Participants were drawn from NCV Level 4, the exit level of the qualification, and comprised eight lecturers and 14 students. Lecturer participants were required to have taught across all three NCV levels and to possess a minimum of five years' experience in the TVET sector. Gender representation was also considered during participant selection. In total, 22 participants were recruited through formal invitations distributed via college management structures.

Consistent with decolonising research methodologies, the study employed participatory and arts-based methods to foreground participant voice and challenge extractive research practices. This approach aligns with decolonial calls for epistemic plurality and methodological openness that contest the dominance of text-based, positivist knowledge production (Chilisa, 2019). Data were generated through focus group discussions, collaborative storytelling, photo collages, and metaphor drawings. Focus group discussions and collaborative storytelling were particularly valuable in facilitating collective meaning-making, enabling participants to co-construct narratives of vocational learning and share experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and pedagogical interaction (Chilisa, 2019; Nyumba et al., 2018). These multimodal methods enabled participants to express their experiences of vocational education beyond purely textual or academic forms of representation. Consistent with decolonial methodologies, they recognise embodied, visual, and narrative knowledge as legitimate forms of epistemic expression (Chilisa, 2019; Smith, 2012). By incorporating arts-based and dialogical approaches, the study challenged the epistemic dominance of conventional interview-based research and created space for more situated and culturally grounded forms of knowledge production.

Trustworthiness was guided by the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement, verbatim quotations, and iterative data analysis. Dependability and confirmability were supported by an audit trail documenting methodological and analytical decisions, while transferability was facilitated through rich descriptions of the context, participants, and settings. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the study as the researcher critically examined personal assumptions, interpretations, and interactions, particularly given professional experience within the vocational education and skills development sector. This dual positionality as scholar and practitioner provided valuable contextual insight into TVET while requiring ongoing attention to potential bias.

Ethical considerations extended beyond procedural compliance to include relational accountability, reflexivity, and epistemic justice. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant TVET college authorities, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms in data presentation and analysis. Guided by decolonial research ethics, participants were positioned as active knowledge contributors rather

than passive subjects, fostering reciprocal and dialogical researcher–participant relationships grounded in care, respect, and reciprocity (Chilisa, 2024).

Data analysis was conducted thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis approach, but was explicitly guided by the study's decolonial theoretical framework. Coloniality of knowledge informed the identification of patterns related to epistemic hierarchy, curriculum dominance, and the privileging of Western forms of knowledge within TVET contexts. Epistemic injustice provided an analytic lens for examining testimonial and hermeneutical exclusion, including credibility deficits experienced by students and limitations in interpretive resources within teaching and learning environments (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013; Pohlhaus, 2017). Furthermore, Africanisation functioned as a normative interpretive frame for identifying alternative epistemic possibilities articulated by participants, particularly those grounded in local, experiential, and contextually embedded knowledge systems.

Findings and Discussion

Persistence of Eurocentric Epistemic Logics

Findings indicate that the NCV curriculum remains shaped by Eurocentric epistemological assumptions despite policy commitments to transformation, relevance, and responsiveness in the South African TVET sector. Participants described curriculum content as abstract, decontextualised, and disconnected from their lived realities. This reflects what Santos (2014) terms the monoculture of knowledge, whereby Western epistemologies are normalised as universal while locally grounded knowledge systems are marginalised. From a decolonial perspective, this pattern is structurally reproduced through the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007), where epistemic authority remains rooted in Western academic traditions that continue to shape curriculum design, assessment, and pedagogy within post-apartheid vocational education. Consequently, policy transformation has not translated into epistemic transformation. Instead, colonial knowledge hierarchies persist through institutionalised processes of knowledge selection that privilege Western forms of abstraction, textuality, and standardisation (Govender & Naidoo, 2023).

Within this structure, students experience what can be interpreted as epistemic alienation (Barry, 2024) because meaningful success in the current curriculum requires the assimilation of unfamiliar epistemic codes rather than the mobilisation of community-based or experiential knowledge systems. This directly aligns with Fricker's (2007) notion of epistemic injustice, particularly hermeneutical injustice, where students are deprived of the interpretive resources necessary to make sense of their educational experiences. In this context, the curriculum does not merely transmit knowledge; it also regulates what counts as intelligible knowledge and who is positioned as a legitimate knower.

Tensions around culturally sensitive topics, particularly within Life Orientation, further reinforce the curriculum as a site of epistemic contestation. As Mbali, a lecturer from TVET College B explained, "You can't just talk freely about sexual orientation . . . I have to be careful so that they don't go home and say I am forcing them." This caution reflects the negotiation between institutional curriculum mandates and community-based moral frameworks, requiring educators to mediate competing knowledge systems and value structures. In this context, the curriculum functions not as a neutral conduit of knowledge but as a contested space where dominant epistemic norms, often shaped by policy imperatives aligned with liberal, rights-based discourses, intersect with local cultural expectations. Consequently, pedagogical practice becomes an act of epistemic balancing, shaped not only by formal curriculum prescriptions but also by what is socially permissible within specific communities.

These tensions highlight the limits of universalised curriculum frameworks in culturally diverse societies, where institutional knowledge systems intersect unevenly with community-based epistemologies (Govender & Naidoo, 2023). From a decolonial perspective, this demonstrates that knowledge is never neutral but is situated within competing value systems and broader struggles over

epistemic authority. A further dimension of this contestation emerges in differing interpretations of curriculum contextualisation. While some lecturers viewed the inclusion of local names and familiar scenarios as evidence of transformation, others regarded such changes as largely cosmetic. As Henrietta a lecturer from TVET College A noted, "It's all their own stories . . . Mr and Mrs Mkhize . . ." suggesting a perceived shift toward representational inclusion. In contrast, Avame, also a lecturer from TVET College A challenged the depth of this transformation, arguing that "Textbooks still favour Whites . . . nothing to do with the township where they [the students] come from." Taken together, these perspectives illustrate how curriculum reform may be viewed as either meaningful or superficial, depending on whether change is understood as surface-level representation or deeper epistemic restructuring. This divergence underscores the persistence of knowledge hierarchies, where the inclusion of culturally recognisable elements does not necessarily disrupt the dominant frameworks through which knowledge is selected, organised, and legitimised.

From a decolonial perspective, this reflects what may be described as tokenistic localisation (Kanter, 1977), where representational adjustments are mistaken for substantive epistemic transformation. Such practices leave underlying knowledge hierarchies intact because they do not challenge the epistemological assumptions underpinning curriculum design (Govender & Naidoo, 2023; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). In this sense, inclusion becomes symbolic rather than transformative, reinforcing the very structures it seeks to challenge.

Finally, the perceived cognitive difficulty of the NCV curriculum further reinforces epistemic misalignment. Its reliance on abstract, text-based, and English-dominant forms of knowledge privileges students who have already been socialised into dominant educational and linguistic systems, while marginalising those from rural, multilingual, and historically under-resourced schooling contexts. This reproduces structural inequality in access to knowledge and success within the TVET system (Fataar, 2025). From a decolonial perspective, this reflects the continued dominance of Eurocentric models of cognitive development, which assume uniform learning trajectories while disregarding the epistemic diversity of South African students (Fataar, 2025; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

Recent scholarship confirms the persistence of this epistemic dominance within South African education, where Eurocentric curricula continue to marginalise Indigenous knowledge systems and limit contextual relevance (Makokotlela & Gumbo, 2025; Sebola-Samanyanga et al., 2025). In the TVET context specifically, such dynamics are reinforced through technocratic and historically entrenched logics that position students as passive recipients rather than epistemic agents (Majola & Geduld, 2025). These patterns reflect broader continental trends, where African education systems remain shaped by enduring colonial knowledge hierarchies that disconnect learning from lived realities (Majola, 2025; Makokotlela & Gumbo, 2025).

In sum, the persistence of Eurocentric epistemic logics within the NCV curriculum demonstrates that policy-level commitments to transformation have not been matched by epistemic restructuring. Instead, coloniality of knowledge continues to organise what counts as valid knowledge, while epistemic injustice is reproduced through students' restricted ability to access, interpret, and inhabit curriculum knowledge. This finding therefore substantiates the need for deeper epistemic transformation rather than superficial curricular reform, positioning Africanisation not as representational inclusion but as a necessary reconfiguration of epistemic authority and knowledge production within TVET education.

Curriculum Misalignment, Access, and Epistemic Exclusion

Findings indicate that the NCV curriculum is characterised by a persistent misalignment between its underlying assumptions and the epistemic, material, and socio-cultural realities of its intended student cohort. Participants consistently highlighted that the curriculum presupposes prior exposure to technologies, concepts, and forms of knowledge that many students entering TVET education do not possess. This assumption renders access to learning uneven from the outset, as it privileges

students who have already been socialised into dominant educational and technological environments.

Empirically, this epistemic misalignment was evident in cases where students were expected to engage in forms of knowledge and learning modalities to which they had little prior exposure. This was particularly pronounced in computer-based learning environments, where foundational digital literacy was assumed, as well as in subjects such as Tourism, which require engagement with abstract planning and simulation tasks often disconnected from student lived realities. As Zanele a lecturer from TVET College B explained, "I teach computers . . . most of the students come without any background. Honestly, because as Black children from the rural areas they don't have computers until they see them at college . . . yes, they know nothing." Similarly, Henrietta (lecturer, TVET college A) highlighted how limited experiential exposure constrains engagement with curriculum content:

> *Ultimately, they've never been on a holiday. Some of them have never been to the beach. So, it's very difficult . . . especially with the Tourism side . . . how can you ask them to plan someone else's holiday?*

Together, these accounts illustrate how the curriculum presupposes forms of experiential, cultural, and technological capital that are unevenly distributed, thereby reinforcing barriers to meaningful epistemic access. This reflects what Muyambi & Ahiaku (2025) identify as structurally unequal epistemic access, where historical inequalities in schooling, infrastructure, and resource distribution become embedded as hidden prerequisites for success. More recent scholarship reinforces this argument, showing how these inequalities persist within post-apartheid education systems despite reform efforts. For instance, Vally and Motala (2022) demonstrate that structural inequalities in access to quality education and resources continue to shape differential learning outcomes, particularly for working-class and rural students. Similarly, Fataar (2025) argues that curriculum and pedagogy remain misaligned with the lived realities of marginalised students, thereby constraining meaningful epistemic access.

From a decolonial perspective, this misalignment is indicative of the continued operation of coloniality of knowledge, where curriculum structures are built around Eurocentric assumptions of linear progression, abstract reasoning, and prior access to formalised knowledge systems (Mbembe, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). These assumptions fail to account for the diverse epistemic trajectories of South African students, particularly those from rural and historically under-resourced schooling contexts. As a result, curriculum design becomes epistemically narrow, privileging certain forms of knowing while rendering others invisible or inadequate (Mbembe, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

The "highly pitched" nature of the NCV curriculum further intensifies this misalignment, with both lecturers and students describing it as overly advanced for its intended level. This perceived cognitive inaccessibility reflects deeper epistemological assumptions about appropriate vocational knowledge, historically shaped by Western models of competence and progression. Difficulty, in this sense, is not merely pedagogical but epistemic, signalling a mismatch between dominant curriculum logics and situated student realities. This exclusion is compounded by the dominance of English as the medium of instruction. For multilingual and rural students, language functions not only as a communicative tool but as a gatekeeping mechanism for epistemic participation (Kiramba et al., 2023).

Collectively, these dynamics illustrate that the NCV curriculum does not function as a neutral mechanism of access but rather as a site of epistemic exclusion. This exclusion operates through curriculum assumptions, cognitive expectations, and linguistic hierarchies that privilege already advantaged students while marginalising those whose knowledge systems fall outside dominant epistemic frameworks. From the perspective of epistemic injustice, this reflects both testimonial and hermeneutical dimensions of exclusion because students are simultaneously constrained in how they are recognised as knowers and in how they are able to interpret and navigate curriculum knowledge (Fricker, 2007; Pohlhaus, 2017).

In sum, curriculum misalignment in the NCV programme is not merely a technical design flaw but a manifestation of deeper structural inequalities rooted in coloniality of knowledge. It reproduces unequal conditions of epistemic access and limits the agency of students as legitimate knowers. This finding therefore reinforces the need for curriculum reconfiguration that moves beyond formal access to address the epistemic conditions under which meaningful learning becomes possible.

Constrained Pedagogical Agency

Findings revealed that lecturer pedagogical agency within the NCV programme is significantly constrained by institutional, structural, and material conditions. Participants consistently reported limited autonomy to adapt curriculum content due to prescriptive assessment regimes and compliance-driven accountability systems. These conditions position curriculum implementation as a tightly regulated process, leaving minimal room for contextual adaptation or pedagogical innovation. From a decolonial perspective, this constrained agency reflects the continued operation of coloniality of knowledge within institutional education systems, where curriculum authority is centralised and standardised, and where educators are positioned primarily as transmitters rather than producers or mediators of knowledge. This configuration limits the possibility of epistemic responsiveness, as curriculum interpretation is subordinated to fixed regulatory frameworks rather than situated pedagogical judgment.

A further dimension of this constraint emerges in lecturers' professional trajectories. Many participants entered TVET institutions without prior exposure to vocational pedagogy and reported inadequate induction and limited institutional support. As a result, lecturers were required to interpret and implement curricula without sufficient epistemic grounding in vocational education practices. This produces uneven curriculum mediation and reinforces inconsistencies in teaching approaches across classrooms. As Henrietta (Lecturer TVET College A) reflected, when she joined the college, "I was literally just given a class, and I had to stand and teach."

From the perspective of epistemic injustice, this reflects a form of institutional epistemic deprivation in which lecturers are not provided with the interpretive resources, professional formation, or epistemic support necessary to function effectively as mediators of knowledge (Fricker, 2007). This absence of structured support is further underscored by participants' accounts of limited professional development, as Zenzele noted (Lecturer, TVET college A): "There's no proper development of the lecturer . . . it is up to the individual to enrol for further education." Rather than being recognised as epistemic agents within the curriculum system, lecturers are thus positioned in ways that constrain their authority over knowledge adaptation and pedagogical decision-making.

Material constraints further intensify these limitations. Participants highlighted shortages of critical teaching resources, including internet access, simulation facilities, and funding for practical learning activities, which significantly restrict pedagogical enactment. As Avame, a lecturer from TVET college A explained, "It ends up being more theory and less practical because there are no resources." These constraints systematically narrow pedagogical possibilities, resulting in an over-reliance on theoretical instruction. Within a vocational education context, this undermines the experiential and practice-based orientation that is central to TVET's epistemic purpose (Vally & Motala, 2022).

Additionally, lecturers reported being required to teach outside their disciplinary expertise. As Bongi (Lecturer TVET College B) noted: "Plant and Equipment is not suitable for civil engineering students . . . I don't have a mechanical background." This misalignment between subject allocation and lecturer specialisation further weakens pedagogical confidence and reinforces feelings of professional disempowerment. More recent scholarship similarly shows that such allocation practices undermine curriculum coherence and reduce lecturers' capacity for meaningful knowledge mediation, particularly in vocational and technical education contexts where disciplinary depth is essential (Powell et al., 2025). In such contexts, lecturers are positioned less as co-constructors of knowledge and more as procedural implementers of curriculum content (Hlatshwayo, 2021). This limits opportunities for transformative pedagogy and critical engagement with knowledge structures.

Taken together, these conditions illustrate how pedagogical agency is structurally constrained through a combination of regulatory rigidity, epistemic under-preparation, and material deprivation. From a decolonial standpoint, these constraints reproduce the marginal positioning of TVET within the broader education hierarchy, where vocational knowledge is undervalued and tightly controlled within standardised frameworks (Allais & Wedekind, 2020). This limits the emergence of socially just, contextually responsive pedagogies and reinforces the persistence of epistemic hierarchies within post-apartheid education systems.

Pedagogical Power, Student Experience, and the Reproduction of Colonial Relations

Persistence of Teacher-Centred Pedagogies

Findings revealed the continued dominance of hierarchical, teacher-centred pedagogical practices within the NCV classroom. Student narratives consistently indicate that teaching and learning remain structured around unidirectional knowledge transmission, where lecturers occupy the primary position of authority and students assume largely receptive roles. This configuration closely aligns with Freire's (1970) critique of the hierarchical banking model of education, in which knowledge is deposited by the teacher and passively received by the learner, rather than co-constructed through dialogical engagement. Students described classroom experiences that closely mirrored those of earlier schooling phases, thereby undermining expectations of epistemic progression and critical engagement typically associated with post-school education.

Student 12 from TVET College B shared a metaphor drawing depicting a teacher holding a piece of chalk and pointing at the board (Image 1). During the focus group discussion, Student 9, TVET College B articulated the disjuncture displayed in the drawing as follows: "This is like colonisation . . . I just can't explain it properly." This statement is particularly significant because it evidences how students themselves interpret pedagogical experience through the language of coloniality, even when not fully able to theoretically articulate it. It reflects an embodied recognition that educational relations continue to reproduce patterns of control, hierarchy, and epistemic subordination associated with colonial educational logics.

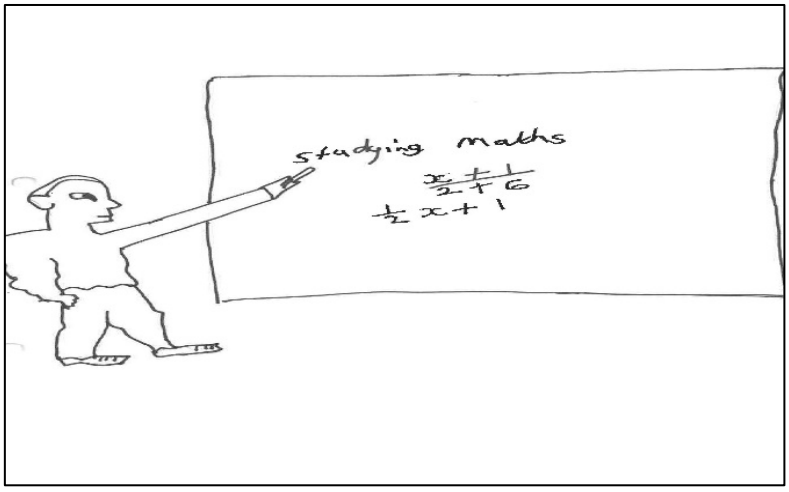

Image 1

Banking Method of Teaching (Student Metaphor Drawing from Focus Group Data)

From a decolonial perspective, this persistence of teacher-centred pedagogy reflects not only a pedagogical limitation but also a continuation of coloniality of power in knowledge relations, where authority over meaning-making remains concentrated in institutional figures rather than distributed across students as epistemic agents. In this sense, pedagogy becomes a site where epistemic hierarchies are actively reproduced, reinforcing asymmetrical relationships between lecturer and student. These visual representations are significant because they extend beyond verbal articulation

to demonstrate how students embody pedagogical relations. From a decolonial perspective, such drawings function as counter-narratives that expose how coloniality operates not only through curriculum content but through spatial, symbolic, and relational ordering of the classroom.

Within the framework of epistemic injustice, the drawings provide evidence of testimonial distortion and silencing, where students' ability to contest pedagogical authority verbally is limited, but expressed visually through metaphor. This aligns with Fricker's (2007) conception of epistemic injustice as not only linguistic but also structural, affecting how knowledge and experience are recognised. Thus, the drawing makes visible what is often difficult to verbalise—the reproduction of hierarchical knowledge relations that position students as passive recipients rather than active epistemic agents.

Pedagogy as a Site of Colonisation

Findings indicate that students explicitly link their experiences of teaching and learning to broader processes of colonisation, suggesting that coloniality is not confined to curriculum content but is actively enacted through pedagogical relationships, institutional authority, and classroom interactions. From a decolonial perspective, this reflects the operation of coloniality of power within everyday pedagogical practice, where authority structures continue to shape how knowledge is transmitted, received, and legitimised (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007). Students emphasised that meaningful decolonisation must begin with those in positions of authority within the classroom, particularly lecturers, thereby foregrounding the relational and affective dimensions of pedagogy. Student 1, TVET College A articulated this as follows: "If we are to decolonise . . . we must decolonise people in power . . . being employed and given the responsibility to teach us doesn't mean that we are failures."

This statement highlights that decolonisation cannot be reduced to curriculum reform alone, but must also involve transformation of pedagogical attitudes, authority relations, and lecturer positionality. Within the framework of epistemic injustice, this reflects concerns about testimonial positioning, where students' capacity to be recognised as credible epistemic contributors is shaped by hierarchical power relations in the classroom (Fricker, 2007). Authority, when exercised without reflexivity, therefore risks reproducing epistemic asymmetry and reinforcing student marginalisation. Students further framed their experiences of teaching and learning as forms of colonisation embedded in pedagogical interaction rather than content alone. Student 6, TVET College A stated: "Those in power act as Alpha and Omega . . . they don't want to read the document . . . hence, they are gambling with students' lives."

This metaphor is analytically significant because it signals a perception of absolute authority ("Alpha and Omega") combined with institutional irresponsibility. The notion of "gambling" conveys uncertainty, risk, and a lack of accountability in relation to students' educational futures. From a decolonial perspective, this reflects how coloniality persists through hierarchical knowledge relations that position lecturers as unquestioned authorities and students as dependent subjects rather than co-constructors of knowledge. Importantly, students extended their critique beyond individual lecturers to include broader institutional governance, indicating that pedagogical power is embedded within systemic structures rather than isolated classroom practices. This shifts the analysis from individual behaviour to institutionalised epistemic arrangements that shape teaching and learning conditions.

Thus, this finding demonstrates that pedagogy itself functions as a site where colonial relations are reproduced through authority, interaction, and institutional practice. Decolonisation, therefore, requires not only curricular transformation but also a fundamental reconfiguration of pedagogical relations, epistemic authority, and classroom power structures.

Power Asymmetries and Epistemic Domination

Metaphor drawings generated during participatory sessions further reinforced the above narratives. In one visual representation (Image 2), lecturers were depicted as dominant or oversized figures. Such drawings are analytically significant because they provide a non-verbal articulation of symbolic power relations within the educational environment. From a decolonial standpoint, they make visible how coloniality is not only discursively expressed but also visually and affectively reproduced in classroom space. Within the framework of epistemic injustice, such drawings function as evidence of how students experience diminished epistemic agency. They illustrate testimonial suppression and symbolic marginalisation, where students' ability to challenge authority is constrained in formal discourse but expressed through visual and metaphorical forms. This reinforces the argument that epistemic injustice operates not only linguistically but also through embodied and multimodal forms of expression. The drawing is shown below.



Image 2

Power Asymmetry/Dominant Lecturer vs Marginalised Students (Student Metaphor Drawing From Focus Group Data)

These visual narratives are significant because they extend beyond verbal accounts to demonstrate how power is experienced and interpreted in embodied and symbolic forms. Such representations suggest that classroom relations are not merely instructional but also hierarchical and effectively charged, shaping how students position themselves within the learning environment. From a pedagogical perspective, such asymmetries limit critical engagement and reinforce passive learning, thereby undermining students' development as epistemic agents capable of questioning, interpreting, and contributing to knowledge co-production (Hardman, 2024). A further implication of these dynamics is the creation of a climate of fear, where students reported reluctance to challenge lecturers or raise concerns due to fears of victimisation or academic reprisal. This silencing effect contributes to the erosion of student agency and reinforces compliance rather than critical participation (Hardman, 2024).

Within broader theoretical debates, some dominant sociological readings of power often emphasise patriarchy as a key organising structure of authority, particularly in institutional contexts where male teachers may embody disciplinary control and hierarchical dominance (Connell, 2019). While gendered authority dynamics were not the central focus of this study, such perspectives are useful in illuminating how classroom power can also intersect with patriarchal norms, where masculinity is sometimes associated with authority, control, and unquestioned legitimacy (Connell, 2019). In

contexts where male lecturers occupy positions of disciplinary power, students may experience authority not only as institutional but also as gendered, further intensifying perceptions of dominance and constraint. However, the findings here suggest that these dynamics are not reducible to gender alone but are better understood as part of broader epistemic and institutional hierarchies that structure lecturer–student relations.

Further student accounts reveal that these power asymmetries are not only instructional but also emotional and psychological, often manifesting in ways that undermine student confidence, dignity, and participation. This was powerfully illustrated through additional metaphor drawings, one of which depicted a classroom scenario where students received marks between 0% and 19%, while the lecturer was shown laughing and declaring that students would never succeed academically (Image 3). Student 8, TVET College A reflected on this experience in the following way:

> *There is a lecturer who makes us write assignments in the classroom . . . at the end if we fail, he laughs and tells us we will never go to varsity . . . so it is a very negative experience for NCV students.*

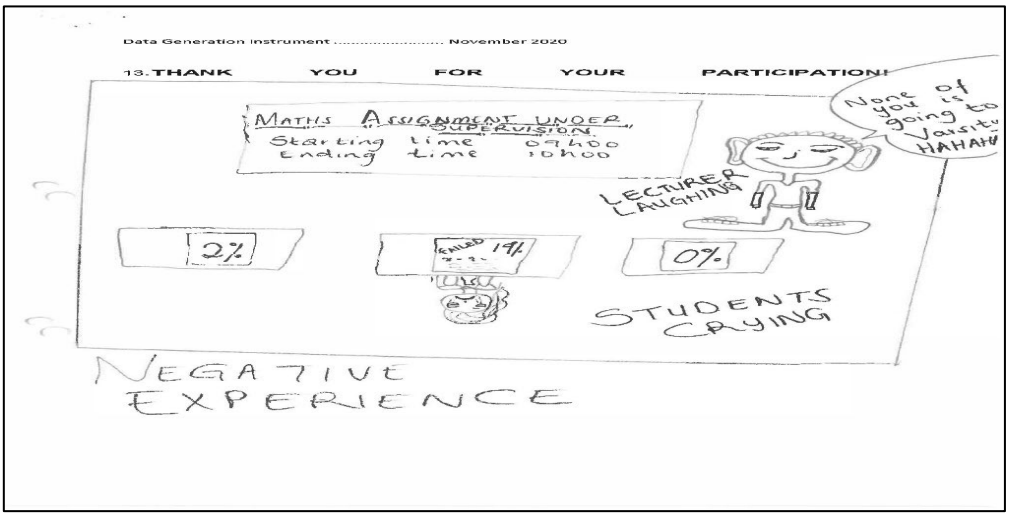

Image 3

Low Marks/Lecturer Laughter/Failure Narrative (Student Metaphor Drawing From Focus Group Data)

Such experiences illustrate forms of symbolic violence within educational spaces, where authority is exercised through humiliation rather than epistemic support or constructive feedback. From a decolonial perspective, these practices reproduce colonial logics of domination by positioning students as intellectually deficient and socially inferior, thereby normalising hierarchies of worth within the classroom. The metaphor drawings and narratives collectively point to processes of dehumanisation, particularly for students who struggle academically. Being mocked, dismissed, or labelled as incapable reinforces deficit identities and undermines students' sense of intellectual and social worth. These dynamics echo colonial patterns in which authority is legitimised through domination, discipline, and exclusion, rather than dialogue and epistemic recognition. In this sense, such conditions are fundamentally at odds with the goals of decolonial pedagogy and social justice, which emphasise relationality, epistemic inclusion, and the recognition of students as legitimate knowers.

Emotional Impact and Student Well-Being

The emotional consequences associated with the pedagogical dynamics discussed earlier were consistently reported by students, who described anxiety, frustration, fear, and demotivation leading to disengagement, absenteeism, and, in some cases, withdrawal. These are not isolated experiences but are structurally produced in contexts of epistemic marginalisation and limited recognition. TVET scholarship similarly shows that NCV students experience high stress and psychosocial vulnerability, particularly where institutional support is weak (Buthelezi et al., 2024; Nefdt et al., 2025), with clear links to poor performance and dropout (Mthimunye & Mokgosi, 2024; Ndlalane-Bapela, 2024). This reinforces emotional distress as systemic rather than individual.

From a decolonial perspective, these affective outcomes reflect the coloniality of knowledge, where students are positioned as less capable knowers due to linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds, shaping both access and emotional engagement. Curriculum misalignment and weak recognition of diverse epistemic backgrounds intensify this exclusion (Buthelezi et al., 2024; Vimbelo & Bayaga, 2024). Epistemic injustice frameworks further explain these experiences as testimonial and hermeneutical marginalisation (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013), where exclusion from meaningful knowledge participation produces both cognitive and emotional strain (Nefdt et al., 2025).

Focus group data showed shared frustration linked to being ignored, underestimated, or subjected to punitive pedagogies, indicating patterned rather than individual experiences. These align with lecturers' concerns about absenteeism and dropout, reinforcing links between pedagogy, emotional distress, and institutional outcomes (Mthimunye & Mokgosi, 2024; Ndlalane-Bapela, 2024). Emotional well-being is thus inseparable from epistemic conditions of teaching and learning. The findings suggest that anxiety, fear, and demotivation are embedded within pedagogical systems that fail to affirm students as legitimate knowers. Addressing well-being therefore requires transforming the epistemic and pedagogical relations that produce these outcomes.

Coloniality, Epistemic Injustice, and the Possibilities for Pedagogical Reconstitution

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that pedagogical practices within the NCV programme are not neutral or merely technical, but are deeply implicated in the reproduction of power, inequality, and epistemic injustice. Rather than functioning solely as a mechanism for skills development, the NCV classroom emerges as a contested epistemic space in which knowledge, authority, and legitimacy are continuously negotiated. At the same time, the findings point to emerging possibilities for reimagining pedagogy in more relational, humane, and contextually grounded ways.

A consistent pattern across the data is the persistence of coloniality of knowledge, reflected in Eurocentric curriculum design, hierarchical pedagogical relations, standardised assessment regimes, and institutional rigidity. These interrelated structures sustain inherited epistemic hierarchies that privilege Eurocentric epistemologies while marginalising situated, experiential, and community-based ways of knowing (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Quijano, 2007). Within this context, multiple forms of epistemic injustice are produced across both student and lecturer experiences. Students experience exclusion from meaningful epistemic participation, limited recognition as credible knowers, and constrained opportunities to connect learning with lived realities. Lecturers, in turn, face restricted pedagogical agency, insufficient epistemic support, and limited autonomy to adapt curricula. In both cases, epistemic relations are structured in ways that diminish their capacity to act as knowledge agents (Fricker, 2007; Pohlhaus, 2017).

Africanisation, in this context, does not appear as a fully institutionalised framework, but rather as an implicit and fragmented response to epistemic dislocation. It is evident in lecturers' efforts to contextualise content, students' calls for more meaningful pedagogies, and subtle forms of resistance to decontextualised knowledge. As such, it operates less as formal policy enactment and more as an

emergent pedagogical orientation toward relevance, cultural situatedness, and responsiveness. From a decolonial perspective, these practices simultaneously reveal the persistence of coloniality and the possibility of epistemic reconstitution. While dominant structures continue to reproduce Eurocentric logics, everyday acts of adaptation and resistance point toward alternative epistemic imaginaries grounded in local knowledge and lived experience (Chilisa 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). The tension between institutional rigidity and pedagogical improvisation thus becomes a critical site for the pursuit of epistemic justice in TVET colleges. The findings thus confirm that the NCV programme remains shaped by enduring colonial epistemic structures that produce systemic exclusion. However, they also reveal emergent, though uneven, possibilities for transformation, offering important entry points for rethinking curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional practice toward greater epistemic plurality, contextual relevance, and social justice.

Implications for Social and Economic Change and Curriculum Redesign: Africanisation

The findings underscore the need to rethink vocational curricula beyond narrow technical skills acquisition. The NCV programme, in its current form, reflects epistemic structures that privilege standardised, Eurocentric knowledge over situated, experiential, and community-based ways of knowing. From a decolonial perspective, this signals the persistence of the coloniality of knowledge, where curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment remain anchored in inherited hierarchies that are insufficiently responsive to local realities (Sebola-Samanyanga et al., 2025). Africanisation must therefore move beyond symbolic inclusion toward structural transformation of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and institutional culture. Recent TVET scholarship similarly calls for a shift from compliance-driven implementation to contextually responsive, student-centred, and socially just pedagogies (Buthelezi et al., 2024; Nefdt et al., 2025). This reframes curriculum responsiveness as both pedagogical and epistemic, requiring recognition of diverse knowledge systems in formal education.

It further entails repositioning lecturers as curriculum mediators rather than passive implementers, and legitimising indigenous, community-based, and experiential knowledge as epistemic resources in line with epistemic pluralism (Mbembe, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). This requires rethinking what counts as legitimate knowledge and how it is assessed in TVET colleges. Ubuntu-informed pedagogies offer a complementary pathway for reorienting vocational education toward relationality, care, and collective knowledge production. Ubuntu foregrounds interdependence and human dignity, challenging individualised and hierarchical learning models (Msila, 2023; Ngubane & Makua, 2021), with emerging evidence of its potential to enhance pedagogy and student belonging in vocational contexts (Vimbelo & Bayaga, 2024). For policymakers and practitioners, these findings call for engaging lecturers and students as co-designers of curriculum and recognising TVET colleges as sites of knowledge production where epistemic authority is distributed rather than centralised (Ndlalane-Bapela, 2024). Overall, Africanisation as curriculum redesign demands epistemic and institutional transformation beyond tokenism toward epistemic justice, contextual relevance, and educational equity in TVET colleges.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the NCV curriculum constitutes a contested epistemic space where social inclusion and educational emancipation are undermined by persistent colonial logics. Despite post-apartheid commitments to transformation, vocational education continues to reproduce hierarchies that privilege Eurocentric knowledge while marginalising situated, experiential, and community-based ways of knowing (Mbembe, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Sebola-Samanyanga et al., 2025). By foregrounding TVET lecturer and student perspectives, the study highlights the limits of prevailing pedagogies and possibilities for decolonial reimagining. Findings show how curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional practices reproduce epistemic injustice, constraining students' and lecturers' capacities

as knowers (Fricker, 2007; Pohlhaus, 2017), while also revealing emergent practices of contextualisation and resistance**.**

Reclaiming vocational education as social change requires decolonial praxis that rehumanises learning, disrupts hierarchical knowledge systems, and affirms students as epistemic agents. This entails situating vocational knowledge within African philosophies and lived realities and recognising TVET institutions as knowledge-producing spaces. Recent scholarship similarly calls for contextually grounded, participatory, and socially just pedagogies (Buthelezi et al., 2024; Nefdt et al., 2025). Decolonial transformation in TVET is thus not only curricular but an ethical and epistemological project aimed at restoring dignity, recognition, and epistemic agency.

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