Towards enhancing the state of quality of teaching and learning in South Africa's higher education: The relevance of Paulo Freire's dialogical approach

A. L. Ncube
Department of International Relations
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3330-8426

S. P. C. Onwuegbuchulam
Centre for Gender and Africa Studies
University of the Free State
Bloemfontein, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3170-8266

ABSTRACT

South Africa's education system still reflects apartheid legacies and faces inequalities, socio-economic imbalances, and systemic inefficiencies that hinder equitable access to quality education. It is also established that South Africa's tertiary education needs to improve the quality of teaching and learning pedagogy continuously. This article considers this as problematic; hence, utilising a qualitative desktop approach and adopts Paulo Freire's Dialogical Approach as an academic perspective. The article engages in a theoretical discussion on how to ameliorate the state and excellence of teaching and learning pedagogy in South Africa. The discussion around integrating the dialogical principles into South Africa's higher education could contribute to human development by cultivating critical thinkers capable of engaging meaningfully with societal challenges. Conclusions further suggest that educators be encouraged to move beyond prescriptive curricula and adopt methods that are contextually relevant, culturally sensitive, and rooted in exposure to diverse communities. Recommendations outline practical strategies for implementing dialogical theory in universities.

Keywords: dialogical Approach, higher learning, Paulo Freire, apartheid legacy, pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa's Apartheid legacy left the majority of the African population in a condition of significant disadvantage, evident not only in the widespread income poverty which affected most African families but also in the long-term impact of systematic incapacitating policies implemented by the Apartheid government (Onwuegbuchulam 2018; Marutlulle 2022). Notable among these policies is the 1953 Bantu Education which severely restricted South

Africa's black population under Apartheid from achieving proper education, as it is characterised by a curriculum that is heavily restricted, emphasising only basic skills for manual work, insufficient training for educators, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate school facilities, racially prejudiced textbooks, all aimed at reinforcing the perception of Black South Africans as inferior under apartheid ideology (Sonkqayi 2021; Gallo 2020; Onwuegbuchulam 2018). Furthermore, the Bantu education pedagogy emphasised rote learning, Christian principles, and the preparation of unskilled labourers (Gallo 2020; Bauer 2024).

The demise of Apartheid in 1994 brought with it efforts to abolish the policies that had incapacitated South Africa's African groups, as the new democratic government embarked on restructuring and adopting transformational approaches to correct apartheid wrongs in different spheres of South Africa's society, including the educational system (Thobejane 2013; Ware 2020; Onwuegbuchulam 2021). Despite well-meaning efforts to address these persistent challenges in South Africa's post-1994 period. It is noted, in itself, that the education system in the country, shaped by the legacy of Apartheid, continues to struggle with entrenched inequalities, socio-economic imbalances, and systemic inefficiencies that interfere with equitable access to quality education. It is also established that there is a need to continuously enhance the quality of tertiary education (Sonkqayi 2021; Bauer 2024).

Consequently, this conceptual article considers the need to improve the quality of education in South Africa as a problem and hence aims at achieving the following objective: to establish a theoretical basis for the enhancement of the state of quality of education in South Africa's higher education (HE). This article utilised a qualitative desktop methodology drawing from secondary data sourced from extant literature, including books, journal articles, government policy documents, dissertations, newspaper articles and other online/websites articles. Data was analysed utilising both qualitative analysis and critical engagement with scholarly debates (Wright and Michailova 2022; Ahmed et al. 2025). In addition, the article adopted Paulo Freire's Dialogical Approach as a theory to examine in what manner dialogical theory can be employed to dismantle hierarchical pedagogies in South Africa's HE classrooms that perpetuate passivity and exclusion. It is argued that integrating the dialogical principles into South Africa's higher education could contribute to human development by cultivating critical thinkers capable of engaging meaningfully with societal challenges. Conclusions further suggest that adopting Freire's dialogical approach to advance the excellence of HE will involve focusing on an education system that values learners as active contributors to knowledge. This will enable students to reflect acutely on their struggles and engage in meaningful dialogue about pressing societal issues.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – PAULO FREIRE'S DIALOGICAL APPROACH

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire critically distinguishes between what he terms banking education and dialogical (problem-posing) education. Freire (1994) rejects the "banking model" towards learning, where students act as reactive receivers of information. However, he prefers critical engagement education, through active engagement between teachers and students. In banking education, a clear division exists between the teacher (subject) and the students (objects), implying that students passively acquire knowledge from an active teacher.

Dialogical pedagogy assumes that both teachers and students are active participants in the learning process and mutually transformed through their interaction (Freire 1994; Diemer et al. 2016; Pietersen 2022). This critical and dialectical pedagogy highlights the need to confront power dynamics in education and to foster a more democratic and empowering learning atmosphere. The idea of confronting power dynamics in education is less about shifting authority and more about encouraging equity. Students and teachers must partake in the process of actively engaging with education (Freire 1994; Pietersen 2022). In the dialogical approach, there is a focus on more student-centred learning and encouraging students to be co-creators of their knowledge through their lived experiences. Dialogue then serves as a means to transform social relations in the classroom, ultimately raising awareness of relations in the larger society. Dialogue can be viewed as a way to recreate knowledge and an alternative way of learning.

Furthermore, central to the dialogical approach is the concept of *conscientização* (critical consciousness), pointing to an educational process in which learners develop an awareness of social inequalities and engage in praxis—reflection and action—to challenge oppressive structures (Diemer et al. 2016; Ćumura and Petrovic 2022). This concept is central to our analysis in this article of the South African context with its systemic inequality's consequent on Apartheid. Notably, during Apartheid, the South African society was characterised by systematic oppression and discrimination in different socio-economic spheres against the majority African population (Onwuegbuchulam 2018). For example, the 1953 Bantu Education Act deliberately restricted black learners to inferior education, training them for low-skilled labour rather than professional or leadership roles (Onwuegbuchulam 2018; Marutlulle 2022). According to Shih (2018), Freire lived in a similar socio-political context and sought to awaken the critical consciousness of the oppressed, thereby shaping his conception of critical pedagogy. Hence, Paulo Freire's dialogical learning theory serves as the framework for this study as it emphasises education as a process of critical engagement and transformation. Education, according to Freire (1994), is inherently political, as it can either maintain the status

quo or empower individuals to enact change. The framework adopted for this article positions learning as a mutual, transformative process built on respect, dialogue, and social justice.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE STATE OF QUALITY OF SOUTH AFRICA'S HIGHER EDUCATION

Heleta (2016) views South African HE system as one that is rooted in the colonial system, grounded on a curriculum that lacks content on relevant history. As such, the current HE curriculum still largely reflects the colonial and apartheid worldviews (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017; Sonkqayi 2021; Gallo 2020; Bauer 2024). Notably, on the need to incorporate curriculum content relevant to learners into educational systems, Sato (2016) notes that Western international relations theories fail to explain historical legacies of African nations. Hence, the author calls for the development of region-specific theories that better reflect the experiences and challenges of these regions. Further to this, Diarra (2018) highlights the lack of integration of African values and philosophies, such as Ubuntu, into formal education curricula and discusses the challenges and perspectives of incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into contemporary education. Consequently, most South African academics who specialise in African studies depend on Western interpretations (Mpofu 2023). This reaffirms the view that only Western knowledge can be relied on, with the consequence that knowledge systems from Africa are often ignored (Onwuegbuchulam 2023). This reality could constrain efforts to realise effective dialogical experience at HE establishments, as it may confine African learners to relying solely on Western knowledge and trusting it. Markedly, when this kind of approach is adopted and allowed to be dominant, realising education that could be instrumental to societal progress could be stunted with learners who graduate from South African higher learning institutions. However, distancing and alienation from their background leaves them oblivious to the limited understanding of historical legacies perpetuating in their current reality. Ultimately, a lack of critical engagement on how to create better realities (Onwuegbuchulam 2023).

The decolonisation movement in South African HE has continuously called for the dismantling of Eurocentric paradigms that have historically shaped academic discourse and learning materials (Heleta 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017; Onwuegbuchulam 2023; Hlatshwayo 2023). It is suggested that by shifting away from a uniform learning model, institutions can develop curricula that are more inclusive, reflective of African histories and knowledge systems, and capable of addressing the socio-political and economic challenges unique to the continent (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ndlovu 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017; Onwuegbuchulam

2023; Hlatshwayo 2023). This shift is meant to allow students to gain critical thinking skills, allowing them to question the material and its relevance to the creation and advancement of knowledge that resembles their lived experiences. It is therefore suggested that South African youths need to understand their country and its history before they can understand Western curricula or theories. There is a need to revise curricula at HE institutions in South Africa which consider the centrality of African contexts. For Onwuegbuchulam (2023), this is important because an African-centred curriculum could allow students to engage with African knowledge systems, thereby helping them remain relevant to their context. As such, quality HE could be achieved in the South African context by utilising, first and foremost, a revised curriculum relevant to learners.

South African HE institutions are currently confronted with an unprecedented surge in student applications, placing significant strain on already limited institutional capacity (Bawa and Meyer 2025; Meyer 2025). The University of Johannesburg (UJ) received 693,990 submissions for admission in 2025, translating to a total of 358 992 candidates for 10900 undergraduate spaces (Gcwalisile 2025). Many universities are overcrowded and under-resourced, with staff shortages contributing to a protracted, inefficient registration process (Mabizela and Mthembu 2025; Sekonyela 2021). Complicating this dire state and the lack of capacity at HE institutions in the country is the shortage of space and personnel, which has resulted in overcrowded classrooms (Mabizela and Mthembu 2025; Lubicz-Nawrocka 2019). Notably, improving the HE sector cannot be undertaken without understanding classroom configurations and curricular structures. This ultimately promotes traditional ways of learning, which disregard students as co-creators of knowledge and expect students to absorb information passively (Lubicz-Nawrocka 2019).

Furthermore, Le Grange (2020) found that decolonising education will require integrating the four principles of relational accountability, highlighting the relativeness between curriculum and relationships. Respectful representation by acknowledging Indigenous voices and knowledge. Reciprocal appropriation promotes mutual benefits between the communities and the university. Finally, rights and regulations regarding the ethical procedures to protecting this knowledge. The current state of education notably does not account for the aforementioned 4Rs. This is a more humane approach that respects students and allows them to engage critically in matters related to their education, benefiting them. Notably, training based on the traditional banking method (as explained by Freire (1994)) may inadvertently incapacitate a learner, rendering him/her unable to be useful in the workplace, personal life, and society at large. It is further noted that employers currently prefer hiring individuals with more experience rather than those with a degree. This reflects that the education system as currently obtained in South

Africa is not producing students who can find employment or even create employment, as they have been viewed and continue to be positioned as passive students.

At the time of writing, the HE system fails to produce the right skills for the labour market (Jubane 2021; Mlatsheni 2015; Reddy 2004). Notably, relevant education has significant implications, particularly for the high youth unemployment rate. According to STATSSA (2024), approximately 45.5 per cent of youth in South Africa are unemployed. This report suggests that South African youths face challenges securing jobs, and it further notes that an employable person is determined by their level of education. Moreover, it is understood that the higher the level of education, the more opportunities a person is likely to have, making it easier to transition from unemployment or inactivity into employment (Vancea and Utzet 2018). On this, it is the expectation that graduates are workplace-ready, able to put their skills into practical use.

Therefore, education equips people with the relevant skills and competence to apply them practically in the workplace (McGunagle and Zizka 2020). Notably, Jubane (2021) notes a mismatch between job-market demands and graduates' skills; graduates are not employable because their skills do not match available jobs. This also means graduates are placed in jobs they did not graduate for, further indicating that businesses need to invest in skills building from supposedly equipped graduates. On this, Graham and Mlatsheni (2015) found that equipping young people with workplace-relevant skills while they are still in school can enhance youth employability. Reddy (2004) suggests that within the South African context, addressing unemployment requires improving the quality of education, including incorporating skills training into the school curriculum. As such, Mseleku (2022) found that education reformation, skills development initiatives require a comprehensive approach. The World Association of Public Employment Services (2016) found that, worldwide, more graduates find it more challenging to find employment, as requirements are highly dependent on skills. HE outcomes produce skills that are not transferable in the workplace (Baxter, Novy-Marx, and D'Angelo, 2022).

Furthermore, according to Mzangwa (2019), current HE in South Africa is constrained in many ways both empirically and theoretically. Notably, while there are good reasons to believe that the difference in the uptake of quality reforms and their implementation relates to differences of a political nature, there is little conceptual work with which to build a theoretical framework for analysing how that works, or evidence to test it. Mestry (2017) affirms that in South Africa, there is no formal preparation for aspiring or practising principals taking on leadership and management positions, and that very few in-service professional development programmes are available. Other perspectives in the existing literature on South African HE

(Maddock and Maroun 2018; Maarman and Lamont-Mbawuli 2017) indicate a dire need for education authorities to introduce compulsory training and development programmes for aspiring and practising school leaders, to assist them in better leading and managing their schools. Notably, emerging economies worldwide invest heavily in education to produce a cohort with skills beyond theoretical knowledge. In the South African context, there has been a notable increase in the allocation for Educational Enrichment Services, rising 5.8 per cent from the previous year to R10.129 billion, and the allocation for Teacher Education, Human Resource and Institutional Development is R1.439 billion (Gwarube 2024). This highlights a significant investment by the South African government, reflecting a commitment to improving the country's current HE system. Empirically, this underscores the current limitations of HE in South Africa with a narrow focus on workplace readiness and limited theoretical engagement. It is affirmed that the goals of investing in training in South Africa are primarily to empower youth as part of an essential strategy to establish a solid foundation for the future (Trivedi and Patel 2023). This is also linked to the effort to strengthen the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in South Africa, aiming to promote the quality of teaching and learning and their responsiveness to the labour market.

In summary, HE in South Africa highlights persistent challenges. It underscores the need for a significant reassessment of curricula, learning and teaching pedagogies. The extant literature has proposed varied approaches and solutions to enhance the current poor quality. The current article builds on these proposals but specifically focuses on the need to improve teaching and learning pedagogies, which the article considers problematic. The article argues that by adopting student-centred, participatory, and contextually relevant learning methods, South Africa’s HE institutions can address persistent challenges and contribute to a more equitable and transformative educational experience.

Furthermore, decolonisation must be integrated into existing pedagogical reforms to ensure that curricula and teaching practices reflect the diverse knowledge systems and lived realities of South African students. Freire’s dialogical approach is proposed as a guiding framework to achieve these objectives, positioning higher education as a space for critical engagement, empowerment, and social justice. By embracing this approach, South African HE can cultivate a generation of scholars and leaders equipped to contribute to a more inclusive and reflective academic landscape.

THE DIALOGICAL APPROACH TOWARDS ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SOUTH AFRICA

The relevance of Freire's Dialogical Approach

The relevance of Freire's dialogical approach may lie in its positing dialogue as the basis of learning (Shih 2018). Dialogue is the exchange of ideas, norms, intersubjectivity, and opinions between two or more people. It is a two-way process that can be literary or theatrical, such as in a book or a movie. Notably, as established in literature (Maddock and Maroun 2018; Maarman and Lamont-Mbawuli 2017; Friere 2020), the existing basis of learning in South Africa's HE is less dialogical and more of a traditional "banking" top-down approach where students are viewed as empty vessels waiting for the teacher to deposit knowledge. This existing status quo within the context does not allow students to share their lived experiences or connect with what they are being taught. This is because, in the traditional "banking" pedagogical approach presented by Freire (1994), learners are only expected to remember what the teacher says, without questioning or contributing to what they are learning. Contrariwise, students need to be encouraged to engage and participate in their studies, to be practical and equipped, and the dialogical approach could hence provide a basis for the teaching and learning process that enables educators to understand students' strengths and weaknesses beyond testing what they remember. Dialogue enables people to engage in critical thinking, granting them the ability to think quickly, improve social skills, and articulate their thoughts and ideas. Unique and diverse perspectives will begin to flow, allowing students to be co-creators of knowledge. The dialogical approach is relevant in enabling students to connect with education, challenge the curriculum, and shape a better future. Notably, omitting the traditional learning system with passive students. Freire advocated critical engagement with education, in which students critically engage with real issues and question their surroundings (Freire 1994; Pietersen 2022; Shih 2018; Diemer et al. 2016; Ćumura and Petrovic 2022). Akben (2020) found that including problem-posing activities appropriate to a student's level. The anticipated outcome in an educational process would include the need for students to be expected to actively participate in engaging with contemporary issues (Lac and Mansfield 2018; Mintrop and Zumpe 2019). In this, the National Statement on Mathematics for Australian Schools acknowledged the significance of utilising dialogical approach to engage in complex mathematics activities to find relevant solutions (Bobis 1993). Notably, mathematic programs in China and the UK warrants the use of a dialogical approach. Ultimately, dialogical engagements with education and use shared experiences to relate (Akben 2020).

Furthermore, problem-solving contributes towards enhancing programs and also serves as a tool for attaining other objectives, e.g. mathematical problem-solving. Turkey prioritises

mathematics at all leaves in education to assist with dialogical. The ability for students to apply themselves to their studies thus leads to a connection of real-world/lived experiences and education. Schools, as such, are meant to equip learners to challenge and question their surroundings, leading to a cohort of graduates able to find practical solutions to problems (Zimmerman et al. 2018). This is also where the dialogical approach to learning becomes relevant, as it emphasises problem-posing and solving in dialogical education.

Theorising on the application of the dialogical approach to the South African context

Paulo Freire's dialogical approach provides a valuable model for understanding and improving the HE system. While already established, considering the historical inequities embedded in apartheid-era education policy, HE providers in the country still operate on a "banking model of education" (Maddock and Maroun 2018; Maarman and Lamont-Mbawuli 2017). Freire's dialogical model provides a way to address this by proposing problem-posing education grounded in dialogue, geared towards a more comprehensive, student-centred learning environment. In addition, the tenet of *conscientização* (critical consciousness) comes to the fore particularly in a South African society that is still grappling with socio-economic disparities, as it aids in challenging students to critically think about societal structures and institute transformative change (Sonkqayi 2021; Gallo 2020; Bauer 2024; Ware 2020; Onwuegbuchulam 2021). The dialogical approach also supports power bridging between lecturers and students, promoting mutual learning, respect, and cooperation rather than rigid hierarchies. Drawing on this approach, it is argued that the effort to transform the quality of HE in South Africa should not merely aim to transmit information to learners but to focus on a learning process that prepares students to become active, involved, and socially committed citizens. As such, the approach provides a framework for understanding education and learning in South Africa that is equitable, transformative, and dynamic, while ensuring that education aligns with other goals of social justice and empowerment.

Adopting and implementing Freire's dialogical approach hence becomes important towards improving the quality of state of HE in South Africa considering that the framework advocates for dialogue, critical thinking and a student-centred learning that allows students to reflect on the existing realities of their society and how to positively contribute to its change and progress (Freire 1994; Diemer et al. 2016; Shih 2018; Pietersen 2022; Ćumura and Petrovic 2022). Also, Freire's emphasis on contextual learning aligns with efforts to Africanise curricula and integrate indigenous knowledge systems (Mbembe 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ndlovu 2016; Pietersen 2022; Onwuegbuchulam 2023). As such, the practical process of decolonising

the South African HE system could include introducing African Indigenous knowledge systems and the incorporation of South African languages to match the diversity of identity in the country and put an emphasis on relevant histories of the country and less on Western history (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017; Onwuegbuchulam 2023; Hlatshwayo 2023). Students need to be empowered to apply themselves to their chosen field of study. Dismantling the incapacitating Apartheid policies on education is a great place to start, and through a revised curriculum that encourages critical thinking, students would be encouraged to begin working towards improving their society through relevant educational content.

Furthermore, the *conscientização* (critical consciousness) central to the dialogical model refers to developing an awareness of social, political, and economic injustices and taking action to change oppressive structures (Freire 1994; Diemer et al. 2016; Shih 2018; Ćumura and Petrovic 2022). Notably, under Apartheid, systemic oppression was deeply entrenched, with racial segregation, economic exclusion, and political disenfranchisement designed to maintain white minority rule while severely limiting opportunities for the Black majority. Although South Africa achieved democracy in 1994, the remnants of apartheid-era policies persist in the form of widespread inequality, poor access to quality education, land dispossession, and economic disparity, disproportionately affecting Black communities (Onwuegbuchulam 2018; Marutlulle 2022; Sekonyela 2021). Applying conscientisation in the South African context would then mean recognising how historical injustices have evolved into contemporary challenges, such as the persistent wealth gap, high unemployment rates, and inadequate public services in townships and rural areas, and taking action to dismantle these oppressive structures. It would involve developing a curriculum that engages with issues such as land reform, economic transformation, and social justice, to ensure that the promise of freedom translates into tangible improvements for all South Africans. By fostering awareness and empowering marginalised voices through a revised curriculum and a teaching and learning pedagogy grounded in the dialogical approach, the conscientisation process, integral to the framework, could become a crucial tool for addressing the deep-seated effects of Apartheid in South Africa. By applying conscientisation in their lives, students not only empower themselves with knowledge but also become active contributors to dismantling oppressive structures, ensuring that South Africa moves toward a more inclusive and just society.

Freire emphasised praxis, in which learners reflect on their reality and take steps to transform it through the dialogical approach (Freire 1994; Diemer et al. 2016). As noted by Edwards-Groves and Kemmis (2016), dialogue as praxis calls for understanding of our past, present, and future in the world, and knowledge that we able to create a world that reflects our current problems. Notably, it has been established that dialogue management in South Africa's

HE context over the last 20 years has been characterised by verbalism (s1y1m1b) – words with no action (Bauer 2024; Heleta 2016; Jubane 2021; Mlatsheni & Leibbrandt, 2015; Reddy 2004). Students, on the other hand, have used peaceful protesting. In applying the dialogical approach to improve this situation, the aim would be to assist students in engaging with reality. As such, learning should be about reflection and action, less theoretical and more practical. The HE system needs to produce workplace-ready graduates. Through a dialogical approach to education, one can learn not only about the subject enrolled in, but also about themselves, their surroundings, society, and politics, economically and socially.

Notably, for the dialogical approach, the act of sharing knowledge is a process in which both teacher and student transform. In which teachers learn more about the subject and the students they are teaching (Freire 1994; Shih 2018; Pietersen 2022). In that process, students assist teachers in understanding how to decipher educational content for diverse personalities. The act of reflecting is thinking deeply about situations and going beyond the surface level. It is about using a mirror perspective to understand things from the moment of their occurrence and to dive deeper into what might have led to that specific outcome. Upon reflection, one can decide whether to take action to fix the situation, even if deciding not to act is acting. Once scholars can reflect and act, this cements the praxis of a dialogical approach, enabling students to reflect and take necessary action.

Paulo Freire's dialogical approach is also deeply rooted in social justice, aiming to empower marginalised communities to challenge oppressive systems and reclaim their voices. Freire (1994) rejected the "banking model" of learning, where students are passive receipts of knowledge, reinforcing hierarchies of power. Instead, he emphasised dialogue, critical thinking, and collective action to break cycles of oppression. Freire believed education should be a tool for liberation, enabling people to recognise and transform the structures that keep them powerless. For example, in environmental justice, communities facing pollution or deforestation can use their lived experiences to advocate for policy change. Hence, the dialogical approach becomes relevant to the SA's context with its of the legacies of Apartheid oppressive structures, including the prevalence of economic inequality and environmental injustice. A Freirean-inspired curriculum in South African universities could include community-driven research on renewable energy in coal-dependent towns or policy dialogues on the just transition, ensuring that students use education to solve relevant problems. This approach also helps decolonise education, making it more relevant to the lived experiences of African students. Ultimately, integrating Freire's approach in HE could empower students not just to earn degrees but to become active participants in creating a more just, sustainable, and equitable society.

Le Grange (2020) argues that respectful representation involves designing curricula that recognises voices and knowledge of Indigenous peoples. Traditional education models have often sidelined or excluded Indigenous perspectives, thereby reinforcing Eurocentric worldviews and frameworks, neglecting alternative epistemologies, and overlooking alternative (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017; Onwuegbuchulam 2023; Hlatshwayo 2023). Respectful representation ensures that Indigenous knowledge is not treated as secondary, but rather as an equally valid and valuable source of insight. This is particularly important in climate science, environmental studies, and sustainability, where Indigenous communities possess deep ecological wisdom developed over centuries of living in harmony with nature. In South Africa, for example, the wisdom of Khoisan, Nguni, and other Indigenous groups regarding land management, water conservation, and biodiversity protection can provide essential guidance in addressing modern environmental challenges. Creating space for Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum means moving beyond tokenism and ensuring that Indigenous scholars, community leaders, and traditional knowledge holders are actively involved in knowledge production and teaching. Universities could incorporate Indigenous languages, oral histories, and lived experiences into their learning models, thus promoting a more inclusive and decolonised education system. An education system that truly respects lived experiences goes beyond textbooks and theory—it values students' real-world knowledge, histories, and cultural identities, and those of their communities. This kind of system recognises that learning is not just about absorbing facts but about engaging with the world in a meaningful way. Respecting lived experiences also means recognising diverse forms of intelligence, including practical skills, oral traditions, storytelling, and community-based knowledge. An education system based on the dialogical approach and a linked curriculum rooted in inclusivity and decolonisation allows students to see themselves and their histories reflected in their education, fostering a sense of pride and agency. By centring lived experiences, education becomes a tool for social transformation, preparing students to challenge injustice, advocate for their rights, and drive change in their societies. This approach does not just educate individuals—it liberates generations, ensuring that knowledge is not just something learned but lived, shared, and used to create a better future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The state of quality of teaching and learning in South African Higher Education systems requires improvement and innovation. The bequests of apartheid persist and perpetuate the education system. This is reflected in overcrowded classrooms, Eurocentric curricula, unequal employment opportunities, and ultimately, the lack of employment. Therefore, this article

recommends that higher education institutions integrate Paulo Freire's Dialogical Approach into the curriculum to promote critical thinking, participatory learning, and knowledge creation. This will position students as active recipients to learning rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Hence, the article concurs that the current education system is limiting students by positioning them as recipients of knowledge, waiting for information to be deposited into them. The literature reviewed in this article acknowledges the existing curricula, highlighting its failure to adequately reflect the shared realities of young people. This article concurs that it is important that HE institutions and their governing bodies work towards decolonising education. To create a more inclusive curriculum that places its youth and their realities at the centre to assist in addressing local and global challenges. This ultimately reveals its impacts through the mismatch between graduates and required labour market skills. Students are more prone to act as people waiting to be given employment rather than actively seeking to create opportunities through innovation. There needs to be policies that use young people as part of the process, rather than educating people on theories and ideas that are not practically implementable. HE must attempt to link the gap between graduate employment and the labour market by developing policies that position graduates at an advantage in employment opportunities and sustainable development. This study further finds that Paulo Freire's dialogical approach emphasises dialogue, critical consciousness, problem posing education, and the co-creation of knowledge. The approach encourages active learning, critical thinking, and social engagement. This article finds that adopting pedagogical learning can contribute to curriculum decolonisation.

CONCLUSION

The article critically examined the utility and relevance of Paulo Freire's dialogical approach to improving the quality of teaching and learning in South Africa's HE. It is established that enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in South Africa's HE system requires a deliberate and collective effort to transform educational spaces into inclusive, participatory, and empowering environments. Paulo Freire's dialogical approach provides a strong foundation for this transformation by advocating for education as a tool for liberation, where students are not passive recipients but active co-creators of knowledge. Notably, the project of decolonising education in South Africa should not just be about changing course content; it should be about restructuring power dynamics in the classroom, ensuring academic accessibility, and fostering an environment where marginalised voices are heard and valued. As such, Freire's emphasis on dialogue, co-creation of knowledge, and respect for lived experiences aligns with South Africa's need to decolonise education and empower students as

active agents of change. Also, in South Africa, where many students still face barriers due to economic inequality, linguistic exclusion, and limited access to quality resources, a Freirean-inspired system can help bridge these gaps by making education more engaging, relevant, and socially responsive. Through this, South Africa's HE institutions can equip students with the tools to challenge oppressive structures, develop innovative solutions, and contribute to a more just and equitable society. Ultimately, integrating Freire's approach in HE is not just about improving academic outcomes, it is about liberating minds, transforming communities, and ensuring that education serves as a force for sustainable social change.

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