[COMMENTARY]

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Decolonising occupational therapy education in South Africa: a commentary on moving from conceptual ambiguity to relational praxis

ABSTRACT

This commentary responds to growing but uneven engagement with decolonising occupational therapy education in South Africa. Drawing on personal reflections following national conversations with occupational therapy educators and from international professional discourse a striking tension exists: the profession speaks confidently about occupational justice and contextual responsiveness yet there remains a limited articulation of what decolonising occupational therapy education entails. This commentary seeks to clarify what decolonising education is and argues that decolonising is not additive reform, symbolic inclusion, or wholesale rejection of Global North scholarship. Rather, it is an ongoing epistemic, pedagogical and relational project. The commentary proposes three interrelated principles to guide national dialogue: engaging in criticality and historicity through reflexive examination of power and positionality; valuing epistemic plurality through integration of diverse knowledge systems; and embedding relational praxis that reconfigures how knowledge is co-created in education and practice. Each principle is supported by examples of smaller, everyday pedagogical practices. Decolonising occupational therapy education is framed as an ethical and professional imperative to ensure contextual relevance and epistemic justice. The article invites sustained collective engagement rather than a singular blueprint for transformation.

INTRODUCTION: A PROFESSION CONFRONTING ITSELF

Over the past year, I have had the privilege of visiting each South African university offering occupational therapy programmes as part of my doctoral research. In both formal and informal conversations with educators across institutions, the term "decolonising" surfaced frequently—sometimes with enthusiasm, sometimes with uncertainty, and at times with visible frustration. For some, decolonisation has become embedded in everyday curriculum conversations. For others, it feels like a politicised buzzword—invoked to signal relevance but lacking practical clarity. This led me to reflect on where we stand as a community, tasked with educating and preparing future professionals for serving our country, on what it means and how we go about decolonising. This commentary intends to offer some of these reflections in a way that may facilitate further conversation.

Recently, I attended the World Federation of Occupational Therapy Congress (WFOT) in Bangkok and I encountered passionate calls for occupational and social justice. There were several presentations, many from global south contexts, that showcased locally adapted curricula, assessment methods, role-emerging placements, and the integration of Indigenous knowledges. Many of these innovations offer examples of how we might engage in decolonising curriculum, but oftentimes this was implicit and broader principles remained unarticulated. In addition, during the education day, speakers warned against "decorative decolonisation" of curricula and challenged educators to confront what genuine structural transformation would require.

My encounters with local institutions and international educators forced me to reflect that although occupational therapy in South Africa speaks fluently about justice and contextual responsiveness, we have not yet collectively articulated what it means to decolonise occupational therapy education. Moreover, scholarship on decolonising higher education in South Africa is extensive[1-3] yet literature explicitly addressing decolonising occupational therapy education remains scant[4].

Considering the variety of stances encountered amongst South African educators, this commentary seeks to initiate a national conversation about what decolonising occupational therapy education in South Africa may involve. The objective is to propose what decolonising occupational therapy education is - and isn't - and provide three interrelated principles that can guide us towards action, namely 1) engaging in criticality and reflexivity, 2) valuing plurality, and 3) embedding relational praxis.

CLARIFYING THE TERRAIN: COLONIALITY AND THE UNIVERSITY

Decolonisation carries multiple meanings across contexts. Broadly understood, it refers both to resisting Eurocentric historical narratives and to a moral and political imperative to redress the enduring effects of colonial domination[1]. A crucial distinction must be made between colonialism and coloniality, as it shifts the conversation from seeing colonisation as something that ended historically, to recognising how its structures and logics continue to shape contemporary society, knowledge systems and institutions. Colonialism refers to a historical period of political domination, while coloniality refers to the ongoing effects of this domination, which has resulted in hierarchical organisation of knowledge, legitimacy, authority and humanity and continues to exist long after formal colonisation has ended[5, 6].

In higher education, we see coloniality manifesting through the privileging of Western epistemologies as universal, while other knowledge systems are marginalised or rendered supplementary or unworthy[7]. We are now ten years post the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements that fundamentally reshaped national debates about higher education, access, and epistemic justice. These student-led movements exposed the persistent ways in which coloniality shapes students' university experiences and called for the decolonisation of higher education institutions[8].

Decolonising higher education is a political, social and epistemic project that critically examines dominant structures of knowledge and their relationship to power[1]. It requires praxis—ongoing transformation of pedagogical, institutional and relational practices[9]. To decolonise occupational therapy education, we must ask ourselves: how does coloniality shape what we teach and how we teach? Whose knowledge do we privilege? Which forms of competence do we legitimise and how is this embedded in the way we assess? We then need to actively reorient these practices toward epistemic justice.

WHAT DECOLONISING OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY EDUCATION IS NOT

Across national conversations, interpretations of what it means to decolonise occupational therapy education varied widely. For some educators, incorporating African names in case studies signified decolonisation. Others cited increased demographic diversity in student cohorts. Still others proposed the elimination of Global North scholarship altogether.

While these responses reflect differing levels of engagement, they risk falling into what has been described as "soft reform"—supplementing existing curricula without challenging the epistemic architecture that determines what counts as legitimate knowledge[1, 8]. The table below offers suggestions of what educators may think of as decolonising, based on my reflections following national conversations, but on their own might be considered soft reform. It is important to note that the processes named under 'not decolonising' do still have a place in the process. For example, increasing demographic diversity in student populations is an essential step towards transforming the profession and the academy. Rather, it is that these processes *alone* are insufficient and must be met with deeper, systemic disruption.

Table I. Decolonial Processes and Non-Decolonial Approaches

Not Decolonising	Decolonial Processes
Adding African names to case studies	Interrogating whose knowledge counts as legitimate[1]
Increasing demographic diversity	Incorporating diverse lived experiences[10]
Rejecting *all* Global North scholarship	Critically engaging power and knowledge production[1]
"Number counting"	Shifting pedagogical, relational, and epistemic authority[2]
Replacing one hegemonic knowledge system with another	Epistemic plurality[2]

Most importantly, decolonising occupational therapy education should not be understood as a singular event or completed outcome but as an ongoing relational and epistemic practice requiring sustained reflexivity, dialogue and institutional commitment[7].

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

Occupational therapy claims contextual responsiveness, relationality and commitment to social justice[11]. Yet much of its foundational theory and pedagogical frameworks originate in the Global North[12, 13]. If we fail to interrogate the colonial entanglements of our knowledge base, we risk engaging in what van Stormbroek and van der Merwe[14] describe as "copy-and-paste" practice—transplanting models across contexts without critically engaging local realities.

In South Africa, occupations are profoundly shaped by apartheid's spatial legacies, structural inequality, poverty, culture, and racialised access to resources[15]. Local evidence suggests that we are only just beginning to appreciate how deeply sociohistorical forces mould occupational possibilities[14]. If our profession does not critically engage context in its educational foundations, we risk undermining its ethical commitments. Additionally, if we are sending our graduates to work in rural, multilingual, and socioeconomically diverse contexts, but our curriculum design assumes Western knowledges and praxis as normative, there is a misalignment. I would then argue that decolonising education cannot be ideological — it is essential to ensure professional relevance and validity.

De Jongh, Hess-April & Wegner[16] emphasise that political consciousness - the capacity to understand how politics shapes

human occupation and professional decision-making - must be intentionally cultivated through curriculum. Without such development, calls for occupational justice risk remaining rhetorical rather than enacted. Richards and Galvaan[11] remind us that occupational therapists are not neutral practitioners but active agents in social justice. Even maintaining 'neutrality' may be further perpetuating social injustices, and therefore we are called on to disrupt unequal power relations underpinning oppressive systems through occupational therapy.

THREE INTERRELATED PRINCIPLES FOR DECOLONISING OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY EDUCATION

Decolonising occupational therapy education is not a universal process that will look standardised across all institutions. Therefore, rather than offering a prescriptive framework, I propose three interrelated principles that may offer starting points towards action: 1) criticality and reflexivity, 2) valuing plurality, and 3) embedding relational praxis. Within each commitment I have offered examples of smaller, everyday pedagogical practices that can reshape participation, recognition and relationality[7].

1. Engaging in Criticality and Reflexivity

Decolonising occupational therapy education requires engaging critically with history.[17] We must interrogate the historical origins of occupational therapy, the socio-political contexts in which dominant models emerged and how colonial hierarchies may continue to shape definitions of competence[14]. Occupational therapy has its origins in Europe and was brought to South Africa through colonialism, with the profession being established during the apartheid era.[18] This has had a direct influence on both curricula and professional identities. For example, we see this in the dominance of white women, who hold majority positions not only in practice but in research, teaching and learning, and leadership. We must become critically aware of our positionality and intersecting identities, both collectively as educational institutions and as individual educators, particularly those of us who are white females. This needs to be done with a critical posture and humble disposition, by befriending discomfort and resisting defensiveness[14].

In practice, engaging in criticality and reflexivity can involve examining how institutional structures and educational cultures continue to shape whose knowledge and experiences are represented within the profession[17]. This includes critical reflection on student admission criteria, support structures and postgraduate pathways, particularly in relation to the historical underrepresentation of Black scholars and other marginalised groups within academia and leadership. Supporting pathways into masters and doctoral education, as well as creating opportunities for clinicians from diverse backgrounds to return to the academy as educators, researchers and mentors, may contribute toward shifting whose voices may shape occupational therapy knowledge production.

At the level of curriculum, engaging historicity may involve critically examining the dominance of Global North frameworks while intentionally incorporating South African and Global South theories and models into teaching and practice learning. Models such as the Vona du Toit Model of Creative Ability[19], the Occupational-based Community Development (ObCD) framework[20] and the Kawa Model[21 22] may provide opportunities for students to engage with theories emerging from, or responsive to, our context. Students should be supported to critically engage with curricular content and constantly interrogate how knowledge emerges from particular historical, cultural and political conditions[7]. By offering multiple lenses through which we they can view and understand the world, we also move towards embracing plurality.

2. Valuing Plurality: Toward Ecologies of Knowledges

Plurality lies at the heart of decolonial thought. Santos'[10] concept of "ecologies of knowledges" invites us to recognise lifeways and practical wisdom from multiple corners of the world. Plurality is not concerned with replacing one dominant knowledge system with another, but with creating educational spaces where diverse ways of knowing, being and practising can exist 'different together[7].

Valuing plurality also requires reconsidering how knowledge is engaged pedagogically within the classroom. Rather than positioning a single theoretical framework or mode of participation as universally appropriate, educators may seek to teach with greater breadth by introducing students to multiple conceptual models and approaches. This also extends to the diverse ways in which humans engage in occupations, which students should be exposed to so they can build understanding and recognition of the multiple ways of doing across our diverse country.,

Plurality is not only about what is presented to students in curriculum but also about how students themselves engage with and generate knowledge. This involves recognising that there are multiple ways of communicating and demonstrating knowledge[7]. Traditional classroom cultures often privilege confidence, fluency in dominant languages and rapid verbal participation as markers of competence[23]. Decolonial pedagogical approaches may therefore involve creating multiple opportunities for engagement, including anonymous polling platforms, peer-to-peer dialogue, reflective activities, and small-group discussion processes that allow broader participation and reduce the privileging of particular communication styles. Relational pedagogical approaches such as "warm calling," where students are given advance notice that they will be asked to share their experiences, before being invited to contribute, may help foster more psychologically safe and dialogical learning environments[23].

Translanguaging offers a wonderful opportunity to bring plurality into teaching and learning spaces. Translanguaging involves creating opportunities for students to engage concepts across multiple languages to support deeper dialogue, broader participation and recognition of diverse ways of knowing[7]. This does not necessarily require fully multilingual curricula, but may involve smaller pedagogical shifts. This could be inviting students to greet and introduce concepts in their home languages, facilitating peer discussions in preferred languages, or encouraging reflection on how occupational concepts may be differently understood, translated or experienced across linguistic and cultural contexts. Translanguaging practices may also help students prepare for practice within multilingual communities where therapeutic relationships and occupational meaning-making often occur across languages rather than within English alone. Incorporating translanguaging practices allows educators and students to recognise that language itself is an epistemic site rather than simply a communication tool[7].

3. Embedding Relational Praxis

To truly decolonise the curriculum, it is not enough to only recognise and verbalise power structures; we must move towards praxis—action grounded in critical reflection. This praxis is not only structural but relational[1]. Relational praxis reorients decolonial work from abstract critique toward transforming how relationships are constituted within education and practice. While decolonisation interrogates and dismantles enduring structures of colonial domination, relationality challenges the individualistic and hierarchical logics that have historically sustained those structures[24].

Our engagement and relationships with the communities in which we learn and practice are a vital first starting point. We must move beyond viewing communities primarily as sites for student learning and instead towards reciprocal and sustained partnerships[25]. This may involve engaging communities, service users and people with disabilities as active contributors to curriculum, research and practice learning processes. Inviting community members and people with lived experience into classrooms to share their perspectives creates richer opportunities for students to hear every day occupational realities rather than abstracted professional assumptions. Role-emerging and community-based placements may provide

opportunities for students to engage more critically with context, particularly when services are developed through participatory approaches, relationship-building and collaborative needs identification rather than assumptions regarding what communities require[11]. Such approaches encourage students to understand occupation within broader social, political and material realities and reinforce the importance of listening and reciprocity within professional practice.

Of particular importance to the South African context, is dismantling the mentality of independence that is promoted in occupational therapy[26]. Relational praxis requires greater engagement with concepts such as co-occupation, interdependence and collective wellbeing. Decolonising occupational therapy education may involve critically examining occupational therapy frameworks that foreground independence and individual functioning, which often do not fully align with relational and community-centred understandings of occupation that shape our local contexts[26].

Lastly, relational praxis should also be embodied within the classroom, through reimagining educational relationships in ways that position students, educators and communities as co-constructors of knowledge rather than reproducing hierarchical expert–recipient models[7]. Importantly, relational praxis is not only about explicit content revision or teaching adaptations. It is enacted in everyday pedagogical practices in how feedback is given, whose contributions are valued, and how disagreement is navigated. It requires sustained commitment rather than episodic reform.

MOVING FORWARD: FROM SOFT REFORM TO SUSTAINED DIALOGUE

Across institutions, polarisation around decolonising occupational therapy education is evident. Some educators feel incapacitated by institutional constraints; others fear ideological imposition. Such tensions are not signs of failure but reflections of the depth of the work required. Yet rather than shying away from this discomfort we must embrace it. Universities cannot wait for society to decolonise; we must serve as sites of critical engagement and transformation.

The profession of occupational therapy in South Africa stands at a moment of possibility. We speak convincingly about occupational justice and contextual responsiveness. The challenge before us is to ensure that our educational foundations reflect those commitments. The profession cannot claim to centre occupational justice in practice while neglecting epistemic justice in education. If we are to prepare graduates capable of practising ethically and responsively in our deeply unequal society, we must move beyond ambiguity toward collective engagement. The invitation is not to agree on a single model or approach, but to commit to sustained dialogue, critical interrogation and shared responsibility.

In closing, it is essential to recognise my positionality as a white female who comes from a privileged and educated background. I was supported in my pursuit of my degrees and to follow the academic path of my choosing. I believe that with my position of privilege I must be part of the advocation for change, which led me to write this commentary. While my positionality may afford me access to particular institutional and academic spaces, it should not afford authority over the experiences and knowledges of others; rather, it calls for ongoing humility, critical reflexivity and commitment to collective dialogue, scholarship and relational engagement across the profession.

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