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Editorial April 2026
The Value of Educational Research for Social Change

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The world in which we currently find ourselves is fraught with many challenges, from raging wars to climate change, natural disasters, pandemics, socio-economic challenges, violence, and all nature of maladies. We cannot change the world because the challenges that confront us are part of a repetitive cycle of human existence that has been with us since the beginning of time. However, we can strive to change ourselves in order to reflect on our position in the world, where we find ourselves, how we view the issues and challenges affecting our lives, and what roles we can play to bring about meaningful change through the work we do.

Within this context, reflective practice, critical engagement with social issues, and a commitment to meaningful social change should motivate the exploration of contemporary themes and new ways of conducting educational research for social change. The focus of the latter should be on how our research can make a meaningful contribution to the lives of those we hope to touch through our work, and not merely research for the sake of conducting research due to institutional demands or for monetary gain.

The value of educational research for social change also involves a critical interrogation of the methods and approaches that we embrace to conduct research so that they speak to the needs of the participants and the community involved in our studies. With this in mind, arts-based methodologies, participatory action research, and participatory action learning and action research, amongst others, enable us to engage more interactively with our research participants to acquire a better understanding of how they view issues affecting society, and the lenses through which they critically engage with these issues.

Furthermore, in considering how best to pursue educational research for social change, we need to examine contemporary issues affecting education more broadly, in order to better understand how these issues manifest in society, and to identify appropriate strategies to address them. Interrogating such issues through multiple lenses, and embracing a variety of research strategies and approaches, can contribute to deeper understandings of contemporary issues and support critical dialogical meaning-making.

In due recognition of the significance of educational research for social change, the articles included in this issue of the journal not only demonstrate how alternative research strategies can be implemented to effect change in a variety of contexts, but also speak to contemporary issues manifesting in society and higher education contexts such as HIV and Aids, gender, inclusive education,

academic literacy, and social justice related issues, amongst others, and how to address the challenges that these issues raise, in novel and creative ways.

In the first article by Vernique Diedricks, Lesley Wood, and Merna Meyer, **"**Reducing HIV Stigma by Transforming Children's Stereotypical Perceptions Through Arts-Based Methods," the authors used an action research approach in a Grade 5 life skills class by integrating interactive, arts-based strategies such as drawings, drama, and puppetry to enable children to explore HIV stigma and how it is manifested. Through the process, the study aimed to reduce stereotypical thinking and to foster a more intersectional understanding of the pandemic's social implications. The findings indicated that the use of arts-based methods revealed children's existing interpretations of HIV, highlighted knowledge gaps, and encouraged greater empathy. These findings could assist teachers in bridging the gap between theoretical curriculum requirements and children's lived realities, thereby ensuring that HIV education becomes more relevant and engaging.

In the next article, "Walking With Words: A Reflexive Journey of Pre-Project Engagement Through Poetic and Participatory Methods," by Bruce Damons, Deidre Geduld, Noluvo Rangana, Oyama Soga, Amy De Raedt, Jonathan Joseph, Nomthandazo Pukwana, Asiphe Tonjeni, and Derrick Joseph, the authors from a multi-stakeholder key advisory set team critically examine the pre-project finalisation stage of a National Research Grant initiative, aligned with the New Frontiers in Research Fund multilateral project. Using critical pedagogy and participatory praxis, the team engaged school and community stakeholders through two creative methods—a video documenting physical movement through school spaces, and co-created palindrome poems—to build ethical, reciprocal partnerships grounded in shared experiences. In the article, the authors demonstrate how imaginative artefacts—visual and poetic—can serve to humanise pre-project engagement and the significant role they can play in facilitating equitable collaboration amongst all stakeholders, especially in settings influenced by systemic inequality and educational marginalisation.

In Denosha Maniraj's article, "Popular Music as Epistemic Justice: Toward Inclusive Poetry Pedagogy in South African Classrooms," the researcher uses action research to engage learners in five iterative cycles by carefully selecting popular songs and pairing them with poems to create meaningful connections between learners' cultural worlds and literary texts. Using questionnaires and classroom activities, the researcher found that this culturally responsive approach legitimised learners' cultural experiences, enhanced their cognitive engagement with poetic devices and themes, and fostered equitable access to literary interpretation. The findings emerging from this study indicate that the integration of popular music into poetry lessons has the potential to legitimise learners' cultural experiences, thereby disrupting exclusionary pedagogical practices, and fostering equitable access to literary interpretation. The study underscores the transformative potential of pedagogy that places students' voices and lived experiences at the centre of learning, offering evidence that popular music can serve as a powerful tool for decolonising literature education and promoting social change in South African schools.

The conversation continues in the article, "Improving Attention and Engagement in Special Needs Education Through Visual Protypes" by Arief Ruslan, Dominggo Subandrio, Archita Desia Logiana, and Nurfitrianah Octavianingrum Raharjo Putri in which they report on the design and evaluation of a prototype of visual learning media rooted in interactive communication and cognitive design principles that they administered at SLB Amal Mulia, a special education institution in South Jakarta. The study employed a qualitative, participatory approach informed by asset-based community development involving 30 students with mild intellectual disabilities with data collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and visual activity documentation. The prototype, which incorporated three interactive models—spot-dot drawing, object matching, and multi-sensory visual media—revealed significant improvements in student attention span, emotional engagement, visual

task completion, motivation, social interaction, and verbal expression, particularly in response to high-contrast visuals and interactive stimuli that promoted multimodal learning. The key contribution of the research is in its focus on merging pedagogical theory with visual communication practice to create replicable learning tools for inclusive classrooms.

Lincoln Lee Jansen and Eileen Scheckle add their voice to the discussion in their article, “Beyond Gender: Insights From Grade 2 Chinese Learners About Bravery and Strength Through Drawings,” in which they used drawings and participatory methods to examine how Grade 2 Chinese learners understand bravery and strength through children's literature. Conducted over 16 weeks at a bilingual school in Beijing, participants engaged with both traditional and diverse children's books in a reading club, then created drawings depicting characters they considered brave and strong. The research revealed that traditional literature tends to reinforce gendered notions of these qualities, typically favouring male characters. However, exposure to diverse literature led participants to develop more flexible and inclusive understandings. Rather than limiting bravery and strength to physical prowess or gender stereotypes, learners began associating these attributes with resilience, perseverance, helpfulness, and moral courage. The study demonstrates that diverse children's literature is a powerful tool for promoting social change and challenging rigid gender norms, while also highlighting the effectiveness of visual methods like drawing for capturing nuanced insights, particularly in foreign language learning contexts.

In her article, “School Community Partnerships for Promoting Sustainable Learning Practices in Rural Primary Schools,” Sinenhlanhla Mbambo-Mkwanazi examines school-community partnerships in rural KwaZulu-Natal primary schools, exploring how these relationships foster resilience and sustainable learning. Using focus group discussions, reflective journals, and interviews with educators, the study reveals that resilience and sustainable learning are not individual traits, but relational processes developed through caring teaching practices, life skills education, and strong school-community collaboration. The findings contribute to broader conversations about inclusive education and social justice in post-apartheid South Africa.

These issues are further fleshed out in Melese Shula’s study, “Female Principals’ Servant Leadership Experiences and Quality Education in Low Socioeconomic Contexts in South Africa: Through a Feminist Theory Lens,” in which he examines how female principals in under-resourced South African schools practise servant leadership, through a feminist lens. Using qualitative interviews with 12 female educators across three provinces and thematic analysis, the study identifies key leadership practices including viewing leadership as a moral calling, prioritising relationships, fostering collective leadership, promoting holistic learner development, and motivating staff through empathy. The findings demonstrate that servant leadership grounded in feminist principles can drive educational quality and transformation despite systemic and gendered constraints, offering valuable insights for educational policy reform and school governance in low socioeconomic contexts.

In the next article by Pineteh Angu, “Teaching Academic Literacy (AL) in English to African Students: Thinking Beyond the Fixation on the Mechanics of the Language of Instruction,” the author examines how English as the language of instruction affects academic literacy teaching in African universities. His argument is that while understanding English grammar is important, academic literacy practitioners should prioritise developing students' cognitive competencies—particularly critical thinking—to help them engage with disciplinary knowledge production and contestation. The contention is that overemphasising English mechanics reinforces English's prestige in African universities, while marginalising students and staff with different linguistic backgrounds, perpetuating colonial language hierarchies and intellectual dependence. Instead, the author proposes an alternative academic literacy model that builds on African students' cognitive foundations and that treats knowledge as negotiated and contested, rather than fixed, thereby challenging the coloniality of

knowledge and language in African higher education.

The focus on the use of translanguaging in university contexts is examined by Letsela Motaung in her article, “Tutors’ Experiences and Perceptions of Integrating Translanguaging Pedagogy into University Tutorials.” This research investigates how tutors at the University of the Free State in South Africa experience and perceive translanguaging pedagogy—the strategic use of multiple languages—within their tutorial system. The university implemented translanguaging as a strategy to improve epistemic access (students' ability to understand and engage with academic content) for multilingual learners. Using qualitative methods including focus group and semi-structured interviews, researchers analysed tutors' experiences through the Ubuntu translanguaging framework. The study reveals that tutors held mixed perceptions about integrating translanguaging into tutorials, ranging from supportive to resistant to contradictory views, highlighting the complex challenges of implementing multilingual pedagogies in higher education settings.

The conversation continues in the article, “Reimagining Service-Learning for Generation Z: A Flexible Model for Higher Education,” in which Shah Gershom Singh, Hanlie Dippenaar, and Desiree Scholtz examine how service-learning (SL) models at a South African university of technology can be redesigned to better suit Generation Z (Gen Z) students' preferences, and accommodate disruptions to education. Through purposive sampling, the researchers collected data from 43 Gen Z students and seven SL lecturers via semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and surveys. The study revealed that Gen Z students are intrinsically motivated, tech-savvy, and compassionate learners who value both digital and face-to-face engagement. While students demonstrated strong critical reflection and rational discourse aligned with Mezirow's transformative learning theory, their action-oriented participation was limited. The researchers developed a flexible SL model integrating transformative learning theory with Gen Z's identified learning needs through six strategic implementations organised into four interconnected phases: pre-planning, collaborative planning, strategic implementation, and reflection—creating a more adaptive framework for contemporary higher education service-learning. A key feature of the model is its flexibility for adaptation to students’ diverse learning preferences, evolving community needs, and sustainability in times of uncertainty.

The final article in this issue, “From Rationality to Criticality: Reorienting Policy Research for Inclusive Education in Malawi,” by Ben de Souza examines how education policy research has been framed, and its implications for inclusive education, distinguishing between rationalist approaches that focus on policy outcomes and evaluation versus critical approaches that address unintended consequences and underlying assumptions. Using Bacchi's problematisation theory to analyse Malawi's inclusive education policy, the study argues that rationalist approaches oversimplify inclusive education as a solvable technical problem rather than recognising it as a complex socio-political challenge rooted in systemic inequities. The research advocates for a shift towards critical and transformative policy research approaches that centre learners, teachers, and their ecosystems, concluding that reorienting education policy research towards critical perspectives is essential for developing more equitable and inclusive education systems.

In the conference report by Siyasanga Manakele, “Reimagining Teacher Education and Knowledge Production (Inaugural CALT) Conference,” the author provides a comprehensive overview of the Inaugural CALT Conference, held on 16 and 17 October 2025, which marked a historic milestone in the field of African language education. The focus of this conference was on themes such as decolonisation, multilingual pedagogy, and the integration of technology related to the teaching of African languages, which provided an excellent backdrop for the exploration of some of the key issues that need to be considered when African languages are used as medium of instruction in teacher education programmes and knowledge production in various contexts. Overall, the conference demonstrated that African languages possess the capacity to serve as legitimate mediums of academic

discourse and catalysts for educational transformation, while highlighting systemic challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and insufficient policy support that must be addressed for sustainable change.

The issue is rounded off with Logamurthie Athiemoolam's review of the book, *Education Research in African Contexts: Traditions and New Beginnings for Knowledge and Impact*, edited by Paul Webb, Mathabo Khau, and Proscovia Namubiru Ssentamu (2024), in which he applauds the book for demonstrating how research conducted within African contexts can be reimagined by incorporating African worldviews, paradigms, and experiences into the research process. Furthermore, he lauds the book for grounding research within African socio-political and cultural frameworks, for its methodological rigour combined with cultural sensitivity, and for its accessibility to both experienced and emerging scholars.

The articles in this issue collectively affirm that education research for social change is not a luxury, or an academic pursuit divorced from reality—it is a moral imperative. The contributors demonstrate that when researchers embrace participatory methodologies, centre marginalised voices, interrogate systemic inequities, and ground their work in African contexts and worldviews, they create pathways for genuine transformation. The challenges confronting our world—from pandemics to climate change, from systemic inequality to educational marginalisation—demand nothing less.

Reference

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Reducing HIV Stigma by Transforming Children's Stereotypical Perceptions Through Arts-Based Methods [1]

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Abstract

High levels of HIV-related stigma in South Africa continue to hinder effective management of the pandemic. Although the Department of Basic Education incorporates HIV and stigma education into the life skills curriculum, classroom teaching remains largely theoretical and does not enable children to grasp the deeper social complexities and intersectional factors that drive and sustain stigma. An arts-based, experiential pedagogy offers a transformative paradigm for life skills teaching by allowing children to engage emotionally and critically with the realities of people affected by or infected with HIV. This study used an action research approach integrating interactive, arts based strategies in a Grade 5 Life Skills classroom to support children in exploring HIV stigma with the aim of reducing stereotypical thinking and fostering a more nuanced, intersectional understanding of the pandemic's social implications. In the first cycle, we examined children's initial perceptions of HIV and then applied arts based pedagogies to transform their thinking by identifying and challenging negative assumptions and promoting more informed and empathetic insights. Findings show that arts based methods surfaced children's existing interpretations of HIV, highlighted knowledge gaps, and encouraged greater empathy. These outcomes may help teachers bridge the gap between theoretical curriculum requirements and children's lived realities, making HIV education more relevant and engaging.

Keywords: action research, arts-based pedagogies, critical thinking, HIV, life skills, stigma

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Introduction

South Africa's HIV prevalence statistics have remained among the highest in the world for several years (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2019, 2021, 2022, 2024). Stats SA (2025) reported the estimated overall HIV prevalence rate at approximately 12.9 % among the South African population estimated at 63.10 million. Even with the introduction of antiretroviral treatments lessening HIV- and AIDS-related deaths, there is still growing concern around the stigma related to people infected with HIV or associated with HIV (Majola et al., 2022). Stigmatised perceptions can hinder HIV prevention methods because they can lead to an increase in HIV infection due to people being afraid to seek medical treatment or to admitting to others that they are HIV positive (Hallonsten, 2017). The concept of stigma that informs this paper can be defined as a social process or personal experience in which people are characterised by rejection, blame, or exclusion due to their relationship with HIV or HIV-infected people (Kang, 2015).

Stigmatising views are oppressive and dehumanising because they can deprive individuals of their well-being, both on individual and societal levels (Obeagu & Obeagu, 2024). Stigma reduction is therefore a critical component in the management of HIV infections because stigma affects both those infected with the disease and those affected by it, either directly or indirectly (Gamarel et al., 2017). To reduce stigma and limit the impact of HIV, the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2011) included HIV education in the life skills curriculum of South African primary schools. HIV is introduced in Grade 4, where learners are taught basic concepts such as what HIV and AIDS are, how HIV is transmitted through blood, how it is not transmitted, and how to protect themselves from infection. In Grade 5, the curriculum expands to include HIV-related stigma and how to change perceptions of people infected with or affected by HIV and AIDS (DBE, 2011). We focused on Grade 5 because this is the first point at which learners formally engage with the concept of HIV-related stigma at primary school level.

Although curriculum content addresses HIV-related stigma, our concern was that the methods teachers use to teach curriculum content may not engage the children for whom it was designed because teachers often avoid teaching about HIV, for both personal (cultural or religious taboos) and professional (lack of training) reasons (MacEntee, 2020). Even when teachers do teach HIV and stigma, they usually rely on textbook content rather than engaging with children's lived experiences (Francis & DePalma, 2015). This limits their ability to recognise what children already know or have encountered, even though many children are exposed to HIV and related stigma within their social environments and communities (Busza et al., 2018). It is therefore essential to connect HIV education to children's lived realities. When this connection is missing, schools lose a valuable opportunity to transform children's thinking about their own role in either reducing or perpetuating stigma (Gudyanga et al., 2019).

One of the aims of the South African curriculum (DBE, 2011) is developing children as critical and responsible citizens who can empathise with and support those who are infected with HIV. The pedagogical intent is to encourage children to question existing stereotypes and assumptions about the disease. Such critical, reflective thinking is needed to conscientise children about how their own responses to others could perpetuate harmful stigmatising attitudes (Kendrick et al., 2020). Thus, the first author of this paper, a life skills teacher of Grade 5 children, explored how she could reduce the negative perceptions related to HIV through a learner-centred teaching approach, namely, an arts-based method. She did this by focusing on the content taught and the pedagogical strategies used in the subject of life skills, to explore and change, where needed, any stigmatising views of HIV that children may portray. The co-authors assisted her with conceptualisation of the study and data analysis, as well as the writing of this paper. The next section first conceptualises HIV-related stigma from an intersectional perspective before motivating the use of arts-based teaching methods as critical pedagogy to transform children's thinking. We then explain the methodology underpinning the study, before discussing the findings and implications for HIV education.

Conceptualising HIV-Related Stigma

HIV-related stigma refers to both self-stigma and stigma by association, also known as social stigma. Self-stigma refers to the internalised devaluation of an individual infected with HIV (Gamarel et al., 2017). Negative attitudes about HIV, judgement by family or friends, attitudes of health care providers and negative perceptions at work, can all contribute towards self-stigma (Sullivan et al., 2020), potentially leading to depression and hesitancy to seek treatment or concealment of serostatus, which in turn, leads to increased transmission of HIV (Hallonsten, 2017; Latalova et al., 2014). Self-stigma has deprived HIV-infected people of the appropriate healthcare services and psychological help needed to cope with the disease (MacLean & Wetherall, 2021). For example, self-stigma affects the individual's self-esteem and causes social isolation (Ma et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important to transform views on HIV from an early age to discourage negative perceptions of the disease, which can leave individuals feeling that they are devalued members of society (Gamarel et al., 2017). Social stigma occurs when a person is devalued, rejected, or victimised based on their relationship with a stigmatised individual or due to their own status (Gamarel et al., 2017). Goffman's (1963) seminal work on stigma and social identity emphasised the role of societal processes in the face of stigma. He suggested that stigmatising views can be learnt through social interactions in multiple settings. For example, a review of HIV stigma by association across countries and cultures revealed that children between the ages of six and 19 years who were not HIV-positive but living with HIV-positive parents, experienced psychological or emotional problems, disrupted peer and adult relationships, and poor educational outcomes (Mason et al., 2014). This is vital to note because stigma can lead to discrimination, where people are treated differently and unfairly due to their status. Such experiences affect children's overall personal development, educational development, and additionally, their development as contributing members of society (DBE, 2011; Gamarel et al., 2017; McHenry et al., 2017).

Contributing to HIV self-stigma and stigma by association are the social public and cultural narratives expressed within society. Narratives are verbal or written communications expressed by individuals (Piispanen & Meriläinen, 2019). HIV narratives refer to negative and hegemonic understandings about HIV, increasing stigma and discrimination. Examples of HIV narratives are negative perceptions expressed from religious, moral, gender, cultural, and race perspectives (Buys, 2020). For example, a gendered narrative blames women for spreading HIV infection; a religious narrative explains infection as a punishment from God for immoral behaviour (Treves-Kagan et al., 2017). The concern is that children grow up in societies that perpetuate these stereotypical narratives and thus tend to believe what they hear without questioning them. If children grow up surrounded by stigmatising assumptions and attitudes, they are more likely to imitate or model the behaviour to which they have been exposed (Bandura, 1973; Becker-Zayas et al., 2018). This makes it essential to encourage children to think critically about this issue in their primary school years when their attitudes are still malleable (MacEntee, 2020).

Thus, for this research, we adopted an intersectional approach (Misra et al., 2021) to encourage children to think about the behaviours and attitudes to which they have been exposed, and to question binary views when faced with issues related to HIV and HIV-related stigma in their social contexts. An intersectional perspective takes the blame away from individual fault and positions it as a structural issue that takes into consideration how injustices such as racism, gender inequalities, and poverty fuel the pandemic and, when combined, could worsen HIV infection among specific social groups (Collins, 2019; Govender, 2020; MacBlain, 2018). Given that stigmatising perceptions start during childhood and are strengthened through experiences in communities and other social groupings (Busza et al., 2018), it is important for teachers to be aware of the narratives children hold in order to introduce new ideas that disrupt stigmatising views of HIV in the classroom. Understanding children's perspectives can shed light on the necessary strategies to improve HIV education prevention methods. The onus lies on education, specifically on life skills education, to address and debunk these perceptions from a young age because they can negatively affect the success of HIV prevention education (Glass et al., 2020). In our quest to decrease stigmatising perceptions and discriminating behaviour towards those affected by and infected

with HIV, we decided to explore how arts-based methods as critical pedagogy could help to problematise hegemonic HIV narratives.

Arts-Based Teaching Methods as Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy, famously conceptualised by Paulo Freire (1970), aims to expose the enduring historical influences in educational discourses, practices, and values, which result in the oppression of the marginalised—in this case, those infected with or affected by HIV. Freire critiqued the banking model of education in which teachers merely instruct children during the teaching and learning process, treating them as empty vessels that need to be filled with information. The concern with this method of teaching is that it can encourage the perpetuation of social oppression. It also dehumanises children because they are not given the opportunity to question or voice their opinions on curriculum content (Freire, 1970). It is important to give children the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills to decide how to respond to HIV-related stigma. Gilmanshina et al. (2020) defined critical thinking skills as the ability to analyse information from the perspectives of logic and a personal psychological approach in order to apply results to situations, questions, and problems. If children think for themselves how their behaviour can perpetuate negative views that are harmful to those infected with or affected by HIV (Sigelman, 2018), they will be more likely to respond in a positive way. For children to become critical thinkers, teachers should move away from teaching didactically towards a more inclusive pedagogy that encourages children to actively engage with learning materials, and to question and critique their own perceptions and beliefs (George et al., 2019; Rau et al., 2017; Sigelman, 2018; Wang et al., 2017). Transforming the way children view HIV can help them self-regulate their feelings and actions in light of the decision taken to counter prevailing stigmatising norms around HIV (Bandura, 1973; Boyd et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2020). Arts-based methods are especially suited to help children develop alternative perspectives on social issues.

Arts-based teaching methods such as drawings, collages, photovoice, and drama, are methods and practices of teaching used to encourage the health and well-being of individual children and to provide new points of view to approach, and even challenge matters through arts (Piispanen & Meriläinen, 2019, p. 87). To expose negative narratives pertaining to HIV, the first author encouraged children to voice their perceptions of the disease using arts-based methods and then to use these methods to convey their learning to others. Arts-based methods are user-friendly and encourage younger children to express and communicate in ways that are more manageable than traditional banking education (Freire, 1970). We therefore propose that the provision of information to children, without obtaining their input concerning the content being taught or allowing critical discussion in the classroom, should be rejected; children's perceptions should be incorporated as imperative to their own learning (de Jager, 2017; Leavy, 2020). This method of teaching and learning was an important component in our quest to debunk HIV stigma given that arts-based methods can enable teachers to learn what children know, feel, and experience in relation to HIV while considering their lived realities (Nacken et al., 2018; Roberts, 2018). The first author employed practitioner self-enquiry to help improve her teaching to meet the stated curriculum outcomes and to go beyond them through using action research (McNiff, 2016).

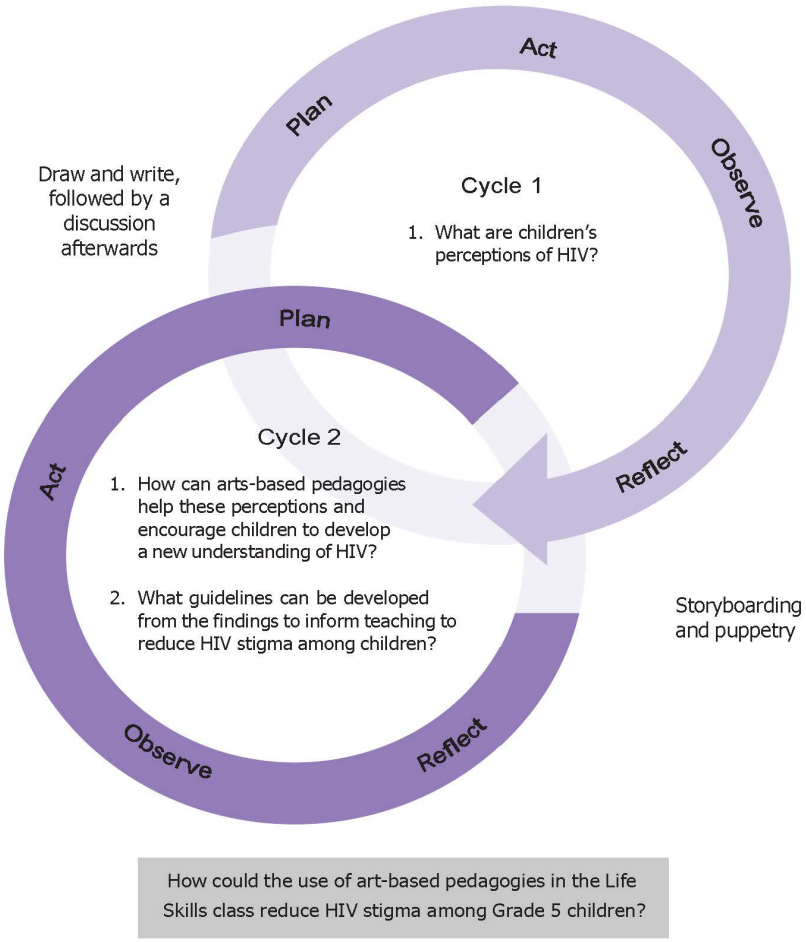
Methodology

We worked within a transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2016) because our interest was in transforming the narratives of HIV and related stigma. This paradigm recognises multiple views of reality and the importance of creating knowledge through questioning and discussion in a safe space. Adopting a practitioner self-enquiry genre of action research (McNiff, 2016) enabled the first author to conduct iterative cycles of reflection and action (Wood, 2020) to answer the following research questions: In Cycle 1, "What are children's perceptions of HIV?" and in Cycle 2, "How can arts-based pedagogies help disrupt these perceptions and encourage children to develop a new understanding of HIV?" and "What guidelines can be developed from the findings to inform teaching to reduce HIV stigma among children?" (See Figure

1.) The main aim of this process was to improve her own teaching to make it more relevant to the lived reality of the children and so engage them more in their learning.

Figure 1

Visual Representation of the Action Research Design



The study was conducted within the classroom of the first researcher because she was interested in improving her own practice; the participants were from different formal and informal settlements but attended an ex-model C school where she taught. Participants were selected through convenience sampling and ranged from 10 to 12 years of age and included seven boys and 14 girls in Grade 5 who volunteered to allow their classwork to form part of the data. All children in the class participated, but only some of them consented to participate in the study. Consent was obtained by providing parents or guardians with a detailed informed consent form, which was distributed in a sealed envelope to learners. To attain consent, the first researcher asked a colleague to explain to the children what the study entailed. This age group has often been neglected in HIV prevention programmes as acknowledged by Hartog et al. (2020) and Sigelman (2018). This was concerning for us because the most affected age group is girls between ages of 15–25 years (Stats SA, 2024), and the learners in Grade 5 are approaching that age.

Data were generated through arts-based pedagogical strategies, namely, draw-and-write (Fache et al., 2022) and puppetry (Leavy, 2018). The draw-and-write method allows researchers to tap into children's thinking to gain a better understanding of the knowledge children possess at the time of the study (de Jager, 2017), and puppetry can enable children to generate knowledge through working collaboratively

and communicating because it assists them in projecting their views verbally while also creating some emotional distance given that they use puppets as characters rather than acting out the play themselves (Kröger & Nupponen, 2019).

In Cycle 1, the draw-and-write method (McWhirter, 2014) encouraged children to express their perceptions of HIV freely and anonymously, thus allowing us to gain understanding of how they viewed HIV and related stigma (Visser, 2018). The children were prompted to "Draw a picture to show what you know about HIV and how you feel about people associated with HIV." Different perceptions emerging from this activity were documented by the first author through thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The thematic steps in the coding procedures outlines by Castleberry and Nolen as well as by Creswell (2014) were employed. These steps included making sense of the textual and visual data, labelling and grouping similar data, examining codes for overlapping and redundancy, and collapsing these codes into themes. The themes were then linked to construct meaning related to the study. Perceptions were problematised in a class discussion where children were given the opportunity to voice their opinions on the perceptions portrayed. In problem-posing pedagogy, teachers problematise questions asked in class. In this case, where negative views were discussed, the first author introduced an alternative understanding of HIV as a social issue rather than an individual deficit to encourage children to think differently about the effects of HIV stigma. This discussion was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

Cycle 2 incorporated puppetry to encourage more empathy-oriented behaviours by giving children the opportunity to express themselves creatively. The children created a storyboard based on their changed perceptions and planned a short drama, which they acted out using puppetry. The children were prompted to show what they had learnt about how to treat those affected by and infected with HIV. These arts-based pedagogies were intended to create a platform where children could not only voice their perceptions of the disease but also to encourage better communication and to use their learning to influence their reactions when confronted with HIV stigma in their social contexts (Davies & Fisher, 2018; Freire, 1970). Storyboarding and puppetry imitating real-life in the life skills classroom, provided a good opportunity for the children to model and embody better and less discriminatory understandings of HIV. The data generated with the children were thematically analysed by the first author. We acknowledge that the involvement of the first author as teacher and researcher may have created bias; however, this was addressed by using independent re-coders in the thematic data analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) who then agreed on the final themes. The institution's ethics board granted ethical clearance, attesting to the ethical rigour of the study, including measures to address power relations inherent in the fact that the teacher was also the researcher.

Discussion of Findings

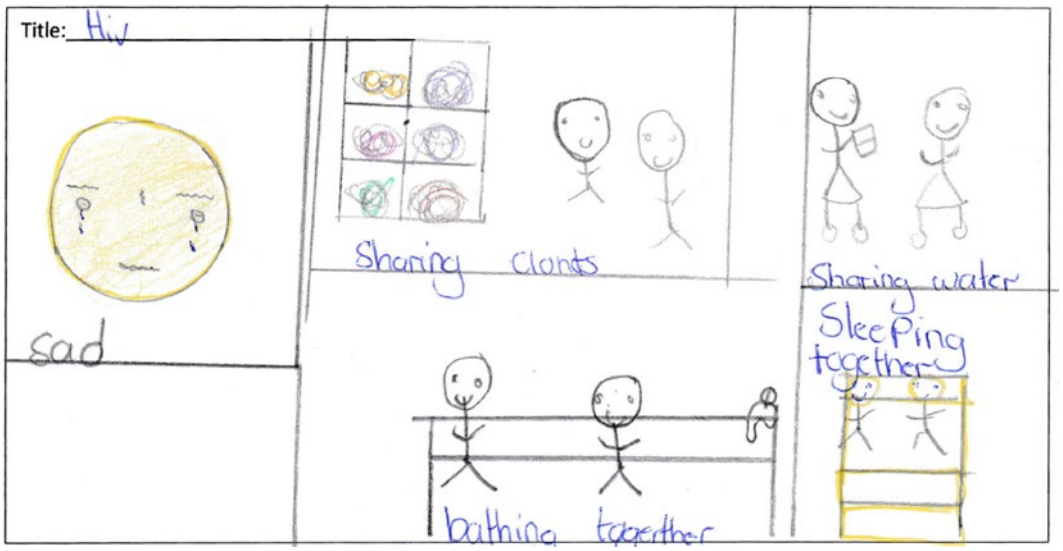
Analysis of the data set consisting of drawings, narratives, transcribed discussions, storyboards, and puppetry performances indicated that the children did experience knowledge gaps and that stigmatic perceptions were evident. However, through developing and performing the puppet shows, they were able to embody positive responses to HIV-related stigma. In this section, we critically discuss the main themes that emerged from the cycles of action research.

Cycle 1: Draw-and-Write Method to Explore Children's Perceptions of HIV and Related Stigma

It was important to gather an understanding of the knowledge the children had at the time of this study in order to expose misconceptions and misinformation so that these could be rectified. It was found that the children viewed HIV mainly from a biomedical perspective and had both true and false knowledge of how HIV is transmitted. For instance, some children highlighted in their draw-and-write activity that people may contract the virus through general acts such as sharing items, sleeping together (without having intercourse), smoking, and kissing as shown in Figure 2 and the excerpt that follows—a finding that is not new (see Dzhugudzha et al., 2015).

Figure 2

Common Misunderstandings of HIV Transmission



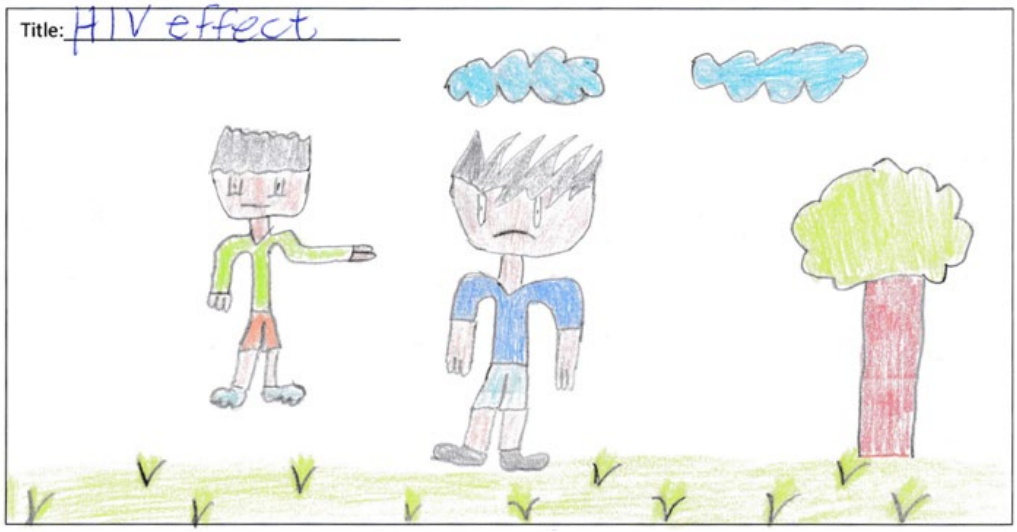
HIV is a disease that infects like a droplet. It infects you when you touch someone's blood that has HIV. HIV can stay for long in your body, you can get infected if you share your things. Even when you bath with the person who have HIV. HIV mean you must not touch anyone things that have HIV. I am sad because people can't share and be friends anymore. And I am sad because people are dying. When one of my friends has HIV, I will feel sad and angry. HIV can infect you when kissing someone or sharing things together and sleeping together, it can even affect a pregnant woman the baby can get infected. (Participant 15)

This narrative could be linked to the fact that in Grade 4 (the previous grade of the participants), teachers are expected to cover the basic facts about the HIV and AIDS, as stipulated by the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (DBE, 2011). Although the curriculum indicates that participants should have been taught these basic facts, the data generated by these Grade 5 participants confirmed that they still had knowledge gaps and misconceptions about biomedical facts. Madiba and Mokgatle (2015) as well as Mitzel et al. (2019) pointed out that these misunderstandings lead to stigmatised perceptions that harm those affected by or infected with HIV, or that individuals may be victims of HIV-related stigma themselves (Mitzel et al., 2019).

The children indicated their awareness of the dangers of self-stigma and stigma by association. For example, self-stigma was evident in the feelings they associated with the disease. They indicated that people with HIV devalue themselves through feeling shame and isolation, or experiencing sadness, a finding also reported by Hatzenbuehler et al. (2013). Figure 3 by Participant 11 depicts how stigma by association was prevalent by showing how people with HIV are often victimised, discriminated against, and isolated due to their HIV status.

Figure 3

Victimisation of an HIV Infected Person



Ishikawa et al.'s (2011) study on Grades 3 to 6 children confirms this; they found that children assumed that children affected by HIV and AIDS were infected with HIV, and thus were afraid of them. As a result, these affected children were stigmatised in their school. Participant 3 confirmed this, indicating:

> If someone with HIV walked in, I would feel uncomfortable even if I know that it is not contagious.

This rejection leads to feelings of sadness and depression. Participant 14 even referred to it as a "death sentence"; however, this is not the case given the advance in antiretroviral drugs as also noted by Burger et al. (2022).

The need to dispel negative perceptions that occur within children's social ecologies became evident given that these narratives can lead to devaluation or rejection and victimisation of those associated with HIV, as also pointed out by Gamarel et al. (2017). Fortunately, the findings also highlighted that, despite their negative views, children seemed capable of empathising with HIV positive people. For example, participants showed empathy when they indicated that they understood and acknowledged that people with HIV should be treated more positively because stigmatising views are harmful. Participant 7 wrote:

> People treat HIV patients differently because they think they are dangerous. I would be very sad if someone I know gets HIV because it can get worse and turn into AIDS and it breaks your body down. With HIV or AIDS, you do have less time than other people. People treat HIV-positive patients differently because they think they are weird and that makes me sad. I don't think HIV patients should be treated differently just because of their disease. I also think that you should be nice because that person is going through something worse than you may be.

Interestingly, in terms of the causes of HIV, the participants showed no awareness of how social issues such as poverty and gender inequalities contribute to the spread of HIV, as also found by Choi (2018). However, they did have misconceptions about the groups of people that HIV mostly affects, as evident in the following contribution:

> The disease is a disgrace; people are being lured and being killed. At least HIV doesn't spread through cough, thank God. Not a lot of people in my culture have HIV, it doesn't spread a lot to Blacks. (Participant 8)

This perception was contradictory to what the statistics on HIV infections in South Africa reflect, where most people infected with HIV in the country are indeed Black people (Stats SA, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2024).

This further highlighted that the participants had misconceptions and gaps in their knowledge. Although children were quiet about the social issues that contribute to HIV infections, they need to be sensitised to these issues so that they can identify these issues within their social environments because the environments children are exposed to help shape their perceptions (Visser, 2018). These misconceptions and stigmatising attributions did not emerge in a vacuum; they reflected intersecting social positions, such as gender, race/ethnicity, and poverty, which shape how children read risk and blame. HIV knowledge and attitudes are structured by overlapping inequalities rather than individual ignorance alone (Crenshaw, 1991). Interpreting the data from an intersectional lens helps explain why biomedical messages alone fail to correct false social meanings attached to HIV.

To encourage more positive attitudes, the first author facilitated a class discussion in which the negative narratives children depicted, as well as the social issues related to HIV, were discussed. Creating such a platform for conversation among children helped rectify negative perceptions and encouraged them to be more conscious and think critically about their responses to HIV and related stigma when confronted with it in their social environments, as also indicated by Gamarel et al. (2017) and Gilmanshina et al. (2020). This can help safeguard children from perpetuating negative views that are harmful to those infected with or affected by HIV because they are more open to critiquing different perceptions of the disease (Sigelman, 2018).

Cycle 2: Puppetry to Encourage Empathic Responses

In Cycle 2, the children were asked to discuss and draw a storyboard in groups, indicating how they would change people's perceptions about HIV and related stigma when confronted with a stigmatising situation. The children then created their own solutions to the problem and communicated positive messages through the medium of short puppetry. It was evident that the children enjoyed communicating in groups because they were enthusiastic when asked to create their own scenarios and visualise their puppet characters, and what these characters wanted to voice during the short puppet show. The first author also reported the children's excitement in working with arts-based methods; they even arrived earlier to school to have more time to work on creating their puppet characters before school started. During the puppet show presentations the classroom became alive as children's sense of interest, happiness, and belonging echoed around the room. The whole class observed or participated in the puppet show performances.

Although the children were given clear instructions about how to create the dialogue for the puppet shows, when it came to acting them out, some diverged from what they had discussed and agreed on when creating the dialogue in small groups. The original scripts presented more stigmatising views of HIV than those the children acted out (see Table 1). When the first author asked the children why the scripts differed from the dialogue in the storyboards, responses included, "I was scared to say this in front of the class," and "I was shy to say that sentence." This indicates that they were hesitant to present the hurtful messages surrounding HIV in front of the class and teacher. When they wrote the script, they did not really think about the effect of their words on those living with or affected by HIV but when practising their puppet shows, they realised that they could be hurtful. Embodying HIV related stigma through puppetry made them realise that the messages they intended to convey had to be different and that they needed to think more critically about them (Kosmas et al., 2019).

Table 1

Scripts by the Truth Speakers (this was the name they chose for their group)

Original script developed by the Truth Speakers	Script presented by the Truth Speakers during the puppet show
Participant 11: I have HIV, who wants to play with me? Participant 9: Ew, you're disgusting. Participant 11: Why are you being so mean? You don't even know how I got it. Participant 9: Yes, I do, you got HIV because your mother didn't raise you well. Participant 11: Why are you saying that? Participant 9: Because your mom was White, and you are Black. Participant 2: Stop saying that. Participant 9: What? I'm just telling the truth or maybe it's because you love having sexual intercourse or you had to have HIV because everyone in your religion has it or . . . Participant 2: Stop! Participant 9: Or maybe it's because you are poor. Participant 11: Please stop, you are hurting my feelings.	Participant 11: I have HIV, who wants to play with me? Participant 2: My mother told me not to play with people who have HIV because you have bad manners and weren't raised well, that's why you got HIV. Participant 9: That's not right, people with HIV are perfectly normal people and they aren't disgusting. Participant 2: I'm still not going to play with him until I speak to my dad. Participant 9: Have you asked your dad yet? Participant 2: Yes, I did, sorry Participant 11 for how I treated you. I even searched the internet and turns out Participant 9 was right. Sorry, please forgive me. Participant 11: Yes, I will forgive you. Participant 9: Now we can all play together. Yay!

This shift from reproducing hurtful scripts to reframing them during performance is an illustration of problem-posing education in action, where learners interrogated assumptions and generated counter-narratives (Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2020). Puppetry functioned as a transformative, dialogic pedagogy (Skidmore & Murakami, 2016) that moved learners beyond recall towards critical consciousness, enabling them to recognise and resist deficit discourses that legitimise stigma.

Using puppetry encouraged the children to embody and think of better ways to address and communicate about HIV by creating the space for collaborative group discussion to confront stigma when exposed to it within their social ecologies. Swarts (2022) also emphasised that life orientation teachers need to help learners become creative and collaborative problem-solvers by providing embodied educational practices when addressing curriculum outcomes. This was done through actively engaging children with the curriculum content using an alternative method of teaching: an arts-based method. In the end, the puppet shows displayed the following characteristics: a character being labelled as having HIV, others being mean to the infected character, participating characters realising it is incorrect to treat people with HIV negatively, and participating characters showing a sense of understanding that stigmatising people with HIV is incorrect and apologising to the infected individual for treating them differently.

In line with practising more empathetic understandings, the participants mostly indicated that they would confront someone who expressed stigmatising views and educate them on the disease, as captured in the puppet show snippet displayed by Participants 3, 8, 16 and 21 in the Hands of Wisdom puppet show:

> Participant 3: You have the disgusting disease, get away from me.
> Participant 21: No, do not talk like that to another person. Just because he has HIV does not mean you treat him like an animal.
> Participant 8: Let me explain what the Human Immunodeficiency Virus is. It is when someone has a virus that runs through their blood. It is passed through sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and breastfeeding so he got it from his mother.

The messages they conveyed also exemplify social learning processes: learners observed, modelled, and then reinforced prosocial, non-stigmatising responses (Bandura, 1973). The vicarious rehearsal when acting out the script likely strengthened self-efficacy for intervening in real-life situations, offering a plausible pathway from classroom performance to behaviour change. The fact that the participants were open to providing advice and educating others on how to deal with the stigmatising situations displayed indicated that they were willing to learn more about HIV and HIV-related stigma, and more importantly, about ways to treat people infected with or affected by HIV. They became more aware of their negative perceptions and expressed themselves creatively by giving voice to their changed perceptions. This is a step towards a more inclusive view for HIV prevention education because it showed that the participants were willing to bring about transformation in the ways that they thought about and treated those infected with or affected by HIV, which supports the theory of critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2020). Additionally, teachers can identify gaps in children's knowledge so that the curriculum can be developed and adapted to provide more supportive schooling environments that encourage critical thinking (Gilmanshina et al., 2020).

The arts-based pedagogies used in this study not only aided the first author in her teaching method but also assisted the children to embody positive responses when confronted with stigmatising attitudes given that they were able to practise voicing their perceptions and this helped embed the learning better than if they were just told about it (Nathan, 2021). Embodying more positive attitudes towards the disease is crucial in HIV prevention because children with more empathetic perceptions are less likely to spread stigmatising perceptions. The participants incorporated critical thinking skills (Freire, 1970) and modelled more positive behaviours and attitudes (Bandura, 1973) about how they would respond to misconceptions when confronted with them. Through embodying and voicing this type of positive narrative, the children are more likely to translate their actions into positive behaviour (Nathan, 2021). Through modelling these positive narratives, the children can become exemplary members of society (McLaren, 2020) who can encourage positive critical thinking and change by displaying more empathetic behaviours in relation to HIV and HIV-related stigma within their immediate environments as well as their extended social settings. It was clear that the children enjoyed learning in this manner because in discussion regarding how they experienced this way of learning, one participant exclaimed, "Can we please do this again?" Other participants were even willing to present their puppet shows to the other Grade 5 classes.

This experience taught the first author that it was important for children to voice their opinions on HIV, for the teacher to debunk any negative views children have of HIV, and also to encourage children to ask critical questions about stigma that is related to their lives—questions such as: "What does this mean?" "Who does this affect?" "What does this mean for my friends and family?" "How does this affect me?" and "What is the best way to react in this situation?" This is in line with problem-posing pedagogy where individuals are encouraged to think critically about their existence and experiences within the world towards social transformation (Freire, 1970). Reflecting more deeply on her teaching, she indicated that next time she would swap the cycles of action research around for children to first begin with storyboarding and puppetry and then conclude with the draw-and-write method. She believes this would have given a better indication of the stigma children have experienced by them enacting what they have experienced first, and then using the draw-and-write method for children to express their feelings on the stigmatising perceptions presented as well as how they would change perceptions taking into consideration the critical questions mentioned above. Nevertheless, the cycles of action research were successful.

To conclude, the findings suggest that arts-based activities do more than convey information; they create opportunity for learners to think more deeply about their learning in relation to their social beliefs and action. Read through an intersectional lens, learners' initial misperceptions indicate an overlap of gendered, racialised, and classed narratives that circulate in their communities (Crenshaw, 1991). Through critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), learners used dialogue and reflection to construct alternative meanings. Via social learning (Bandura, 1973), they then rehearsed and normalised empathic responses, indicating a credible mechanism for sustained attitude and behaviour change beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

Our research question focused on the use of arts-based pedagogies in the life skills class to reduce HIV stigma among Grade 5 children. On reflection, we argue that the children demonstrated empathic understandings because they were able to discuss their different perceptions, question their existing stereotypes and stigmatising assumptions about HIV, and start to embody a more nuanced and intersectional understanding of the disease. The children's actions showed how their views can contribute to reducing the stigma associated with HIV infection and how they could educate others when stigmatising assumptions surface within their social environments. Thus, we posit that the use of arts-based pedagogies made the teaching and learning process more engaging to discuss HIV and related stigma because they provided an embodied platform for children to voice their opinions when engaging with curriculum content. Curriculum content should enable children to learn at their own development levels and within their contexts because they experience and relate to information differently (Silalahi, 2019). Teachers should therefore use creative methods of teaching in schools, specifically the use of arts-based methods, which allow them to take context, development levels, as well as their socially constructed views into consideration.

These findings are helpful because they may assist in bridging the gap between what the curriculum stipulates should be taught, and how teachers decide to teach curriculum content. To be more specific, arts-based methods can assist teachers to become aware of children's perceptions, acknowledge the curriculum content gaps, and help to develop pedagogical strategies using arts-based methods to aid in reducing HIV stigma among the children in the life skills class. We trust that you—the reader—agree that teachers then move closer to developing more informed and engaged classroom practices and embodied experiences that encourage critical thinking and enable children to dismantle stereotypical views to establish responsible citizenship from a young age in society.

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Walking With Words: A Reflexive Journey of Pre-Project Engagement Through Poetic and Participatory Methods

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Abstract

This reflective paper is written by a multi-stakeholder key advisory set (KAS) team consisting of university academics, engagement staff, and community-based practitioners from an Indigenous group called the Gamtouers, in South Africa. It critically examines the pre-project finalisation stage of a National Research Grant initiative, aligned with the New Frontiers in Research Fund multilateral project. During this stage, the KAS team engaged school and community stakeholders to explore the potential for ethical, reciprocal partnerships rooted in shared histories and lived experiences. Guided by critical pedagogy and participatory praxis, the process emphasised co-construction of meaning, reflexivity, and disruption of hierarchical knowledge flows. Two creative and dialogic methods were employed: a short video capturing the team's physical movement through school spaces, attuning to affective and sensory impressions; and the co-creation of palindrome poems, used to surface embodied insights and invite reciprocal reflection.

Analysis of these artefacts revealed two central themes: collective belonging and relational trust, and transformative learning through uncertainty and shared exploration. These highlight the power of dialogic knowledge-making in fostering connection, vulnerability, and shared purpose. However, a key tension also emerged: initial hesitancy and power asymmetries in engagement—particularly in navigating institutional identities and unequal access to research language and authority. The paper makes a methodological contribution by showing how imaginative artefacts—visual and poetic—can humanise pre-project engagement. It argues that such practices form vital groundwork for equitable collaborations, especially in settings influenced by systemic inequality and educational marginalisation.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, key advisory set, palindrome poems, participatory praxis, video capturing

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Introduction and Background

The escalating effects of climate change on water and food systems are unevenly distributed. They deepen long-standing historical injustices and disproportionately impact Indigenous and marginalised communities, who already bear the legacies of colonial dispossession, environmental racism, and structural poverty. In South Africa, as in Canada, Australia, and other settler-colonial settings, these legacies continue to influence patterns of vulnerability to droughts, floods, and agricultural collapse (Satgar, 2023; Whyte, 2023). Climate change, therefore, cannot be viewed solely as an environmental issue: it is a social and political crisis that intersects with questions of land, belonging, and epistemic justice (Chanza & Togo, 2024). Communities historically excluded from decision-making are once again side-lined because technocratic responses to ecological crises often dominate the policy landscape. Such responses tend to rely heavily on technical models, global climate finance mechanisms, and centralised governance frameworks, while remaining disconnected from the lived realities, spiritual knowledge, and place-based wisdoms that influence how communities experience and adapt to environmental change (Johnson & Yazzie, 2024).

In recognition of these systemic disjunctions, the New Frontiers in Research Fund (NFRF) Multilateral Grant, titled “International Relational Accountability of Mother Earth: Revitalising and Restoring the Land and Water,” was established. The grant unites diverse international partners with the shared goal of highlighting Indigenous-led frameworks of research and action, rooted in relational accountability to land, water, and community. By emphasising Indigenous and decolonial perspectives, the project aims not only to generate new knowledge but also to revitalise ways of knowing and doing that colonial modernity has sought to erase (Williams & Shipley, 2023). It is within this context that this paper positions itself, focusing especially on the reflexive pre-project engagement process coordinated by the South African node, led by Nelson Mandela University.

At the core of this South African engagement process is a dedication to relational accountability and ethical, community-based research practice. Drawing from both Indigenous epistemologies and critical pedagogical traditions, the project’s initial phase in the Eastern Cape examined how place, memory, and identity influence community participation in climate adaptation efforts. The Eastern Cape, marked by a history of forced removals, labour exploitation, and educational marginalisation, provides a powerful site for considering how colonial histories continue to shape environmental vulnerability (Ntsebeza, 2023). However, it is also a place of resilience, where Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices, and collective solidarities remain vital in everyday life. To engage genuinely as researchers in this space,

humility, active listening, and a willingness to prioritise the voices of those most impacted by climate change are essential (Swartz et al., 2024).

To ensure that this commitment was not merely rhetorical but genuinely embedded, the project adopted a two-tiered participatory governance framework. This framework consisted of an action learning set (ALS) and a key advisory set (KAS), both designed to embody dialogic and reflexive principles in line with traditions of participatory action research (Damons, 2017; Zuber-Skerritt, 2011).

The ALS functions as the project's top decision-making body. It comprises a transdisciplinary team that unites university staff from Nelson Mandela University and its partner institutions, municipal stakeholders, and representatives of First Nations communities in Canada and of Indigenous Gamtouer in South Africa. By design, the ALS ensures that strategic direction does not solely originate from academic or institutional elites but encompasses a variety of perspectives across cultural, professional, and disciplinary boundaries. The ALS thus offers not only oversight but also a vital space for dialogue where differing views on land, water, and adaptation are debated and integrated into collective strategies (Puri, 2023).

Emerging from this broader framework, the KAS was formed to serve as an executive oversight and coordination body. Comprising eight individuals nominated for their distinct expertise, the KAS plays a central role in guiding the project's reflective practices. Its members contribute skills such as administration, cultural translation, community trust-building, and empirical verification of research material. Importantly, the KAS is not a passive consultative board but an evolving leadership collective, responsible for coordinating the co-creation of project outputs. These include not only technical reports and workshops but also creative and participatory outputs like poetry, visual artefacts, and community events. In this sense, the KAS enacts what Damons (2017) described as *distributed leadership*, where authority circulates through dialogue and shared responsibility rather than remaining concentrated at the centre.

Together, the ALS and KAS provide the participatory infrastructure necessary to situate this study within the broader principles of the African Calabash framework (Rangana, 2023). The African Calabash framework is a relational framework that emphasises ongoing reflection, multilingual engagement, co-creation of knowledge, and a response to community-defined needs. Unlike extractive research frameworks that view communities merely as data sources, the African Calabash framework positions the communities as reservoirs of knowledge (Rangana et al., 2025) and advocates for continuous dialogue that persists beyond the project cycle. The framework promotes endless conversation and as a form of relational accountability, where knowledge is co-created, contested, and revisited repeatedly (Marovah & Mutanga, 2024).

By embedding reflexive practices at each stage of engagement, the ALS and KAS together foster a participatory ecosystem that not only advances the aims of the NFRF initiative but also provides a replicable model for community-driven climate adaptation research. The focus on arts-based and dialogic practices within these frameworks further highlights the belief that ecological justice is not solely technical but also deeply relational. To "walk with words" through poems, stories, and shared embodied spaces becomes both a method and an ethics of resistance against the silencing legacies of colonialism. It becomes a means of reimagining futures where communities are not passive recipients of externally devised climate interventions but active co-creators of knowledge and strategy (Bawaka Collective, 2023).

Ultimately, this paper contends that pre-project engagement of this kind is not a marginal activity but central to the epistemic and ethical integrity of climate adaptation research. By focusing on relational accountability, grounding methodology in Indigenous and critical pedagogies, and structuring governance through dialogic, participatory forms, the South African node of the NFRF project offers an example of how climate research can begin to address historical injustice while preparing communities for the uncertainties of ecological change.

Despite growing interest in participatory and decolonial research methods, limited attention has been paid to the pre-project engagement phase where relationships, trust, and shared expectations are built before formal research begins. Much scholarship focuses on data collection and research outcomes, while the relational processes that influence early collaboration between universities and communities remain underexplored. This gap is particularly important in contexts where historical inequalities and extractive research practices have led to mistrust between institutions and marginalised communities.

This research, therefore, explores how pre-project engagement can be organised to support collaborative knowledge creation and ethical partnerships. Specifically, it explores how creative and participatory methods can build relational trust, shared meaning-making, and reflexive learning among stakeholders involved in community–university collaborations. The paper discusses a reflexive engagement process conducted by a KAS working within the South African branch of the NFRF project.

Literature Review

Participatory research has increasingly transformed educational and community-based inquiry by broadening who is recognised as a knowledge creator and how knowledge can be expressed. Instead of viewing communities only as sources of data, participatory approaches involve participants as collaborators who help define research questions, methods, and interpretations. This change has encouraged scholars to explore creative and arts-based practices that enable participants to communicate experiences through various forms of expression beyond traditional interviews or surveys (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Nunn, 2022).

Arts-based research methods, including storytelling, visual arts, performance, and poetry, have gained prominence because they facilitate expression that captures the emotional, embodied, and relational aspects of experience. These approaches recognise that lived realities are not always easily conveyed through textual or analytical language alone. Creative practices, therefore, broaden the range of communication options available in research and provide opportunities for participants to engage in inquiry through culturally meaningful forms of expression (Leavy, 2020; Lynch, 2025). By valuing narrative, metaphor, imagery, and performance, arts-based methods enable participants to share experiences that might otherwise remain marginalised within traditional research frameworks.

Participatory art practices also cultivate collaborative environments where individuals can reflect on shared experiences and try out new ways of communicating. These temporary engagement spaces often encourage mutual recognition, safety, and creative experimentation among participants. Empirical studies have shown that collaborative creative practices, from digital storytelling to community theatre and poetry, can boost civic engagement, language skills, and cross-cultural dialogue (Lynch, 2025). Such processes break down traditional barriers between researchers and participants, fostering relationships based on shared creativity and dialogue rather than on hierarchical expertise.

Poetic inquiry exemplifies arts-based research that highlights the expressive and interpretive aspects of language. By shaping reflections through rhythm, imagery, and metaphor, poetry enables participants to share layered experiences that might otherwise be difficult to express (Brown et al., 2021). In participatory settings, co-creating poems can foster collective reflection whilst maintaining the unique voices of contributors. Poetic forms also allow ambiguity and emotional subtlety to remain visible within the research process, enabling participants to portray experiences in ways that resist being reduced to simplified analytical categories.

Participatory arts-based research is also closely connected to wider efforts to democratise knowledge creation. In participatory inquiry, community members are frequently seen as co-researchers who help guide the direction, interpretation, and results of research processes. This approach recognises that knowledge develops through interaction between different types of experience and expertise. In contexts

where communities have historically been marginalised or spoken for by external researchers, participatory methods provide opportunities for participants to express their perspectives directly and to influence how their experiences are represented (Motala & Vally, 2022; Rangana et al., 2025).

At the same time, scholars emphasise the importance of ongoing reflexivity regarding power dynamics within participatory research. Collaborative approaches do not automatically remove inequalities between researchers and participants. Decisions about interpretation, authorship, representation, and dissemination can still perpetuate hierarchical relationships if not carefully negotiated (Lenette, 2019). Ethical participatory practice, therefore, demands transparency, dialogue, and continual reflection on how research relationships are formed and maintained.

Creative methods also present specific ethical considerations. Issues of authorship, ownership of artefacts, emotional risk, and representation must be carefully managed throughout the research process. Responsible practice involves obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant control over how creative outputs are shared, and providing opportunities for reflection and debriefing when sensitive experiences emerge (Lenette, 2019). Researchers also have practical responsibilities such as making materials accessible and avoiding paternalistic approaches that undermine participant agency.

Beyond producing knowledge, participatory arts-based research often seeks to encourage broader social engagement. Creative outputs such as exhibitions, performances, or community publications help research insights reach beyond academic circles and promote public dialogue. Participants frequently report feeling a stronger sense of agency through these activities, transitioning from being subjects of research to recognised contributors to knowledge creation. In this way, participatory creative practices can strengthen local networks, shape community conversations, and challenge deficit-based narratives by emphasising lived experience and communal interpretation.

Overall, the literature highlights three key principles that inform this study. First, participatory research emphasises collaboration in producing and interpreting knowledge. Second, creative and arts-based practices allow participants to express the embodied, emotional, and relational aspects of experience that might otherwise remain inaccessible to traditional research methods. Third, reflexive and ethical engagement remains vital for managing power relations within collaborative inquiry.

These insights closely align with participatory action learning and action research (PALAR), which emphasises collective learning through cycles of reflection, dialogue, and action (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). In African contexts, PALAR has been further adapted via the African Calabash framework, which considers knowledge-making as a relational and cyclical process rooted in community participation, cultural expression, and shared responsibility (Rangana et al., 2025). The calabash metaphor symbolises a communal vessel where diverse perspectives, experiences, and types of knowledge come together to foster collective understanding. In this study, employing walking video and poetic inquiry reflects this approach by creating participatory spaces where knowledge develops through dialogue, creative expression, and collaborative interpretation during early engagement between university researchers and community stakeholders.

Theoretical Underpinning

Dialogic and Decolonial Knowledge-Making

This study is grounded in dialogic and participatory traditions that see knowledge as a relational and collaborative process. Instead of viewing knowledge as a fixed body of information passed from expert to learner, dialogic approaches highlight the co-creation of understanding through interaction, reflection, and shared inquiry. Paulo Freire's (1968/1972) critique of the *banking model* of education offers a key perspective for this view. Freire argued that education should not involve depositing knowledge into passive recipients but should instead involve dialogue among individuals who jointly interpret and transform their social realities.

Within this perspective, dialogue functions not merely as communication but as a mechanism for redistributing authority in knowledge production. When participants contribute to defining problems, interpreting experiences, and shaping outcomes, the distinction between researcher and participant becomes more fluid. This orientation challenges hierarchical assumptions about expertise and recognises the value of experiential and community-based knowledge alongside academic theory (Hall & Tandon, 2017).

These ideas align with broader decolonial perspectives that challenge the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems in research and education. Decolonial scholars emphasise that knowledge is historically located and shaped by language, culture, and place rather than existing as a universal and neutral set of truths (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Santos, 2014). From this perspective, research should recognise multiple epistemologies and forms of expression, including oral traditions, storytelling, and artistic practices. Such approaches acknowledge that knowledge is produced through lived experience and collective reflection rather than solely through formal academic discourse.

In participatory research settings, this approach promotes methods that enable participants to express their perspectives through culturally meaningful forms. Creative practices like storytelling, visual artefacts, and poetry offer avenues for participants to communicate experiences that might otherwise be difficult to articulate using conventional research language (Leavy, 2020). By valuing these expressive forms, participatory research fosters spaces where diverse voices can contribute to shared knowledge creation.

Reflexive Praxis and Participatory Inquiry

Freire's (1968/1972) concept of praxis further guides the methodological approach of this study. Praxis describes the ongoing relationship between reflection and action through which individuals critically scrutinise their circumstances and collaborate to change them. In participatory research, praxis demands continual reflexivity concerning the roles, assumptions, and positionalities of those involved in the research process.

Reflexivity plays a crucial role in collaborative research involving universities and communities, where historical inequalities can influence relationships and expectations. Researchers must stay mindful of how institutional authority, language, and disciplinary norms shape interactions with participants (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Engaging in reflective dialogue enables participants and researchers to explore these dynamics and renegotiate roles throughout the research process. Creative methods can support this reflexive practice by encouraging participants to interpret their experiences through metaphor, imagery, and narrative. Transforming experiences into poetic or visual forms slows down the interpretation process and invites participants to engage with multiple layers of meaning. Such practices offer opportunities for participants to reflect on their perspectives while recognising how their interpretations intersect with those of others (Brown, 2019). In this way, reflexive praxis becomes both a methodological commitment and an ethical orientation within participatory inquiry.

Participatory Action Learning and the African Calabash Framework

The study is further positioned within the tradition of PALAR, which regards participants not just as sources of information but also as co-learners and co-researchers who help shape research processes and

outcomes (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). Through repeated cycles of reflection and engagement, participants collaboratively examine problems, generate insights, and develop responses rooted in their shared experiences.

The African Calabash framework emphasises multilingual engagement, shared responsibility, and ongoing dialogue between communities and institutions. Instead of viewing research as a linear process with fixed stages, the framework promotes continual cycles of reflection and interaction where knowledge is revisited and reinterpreted over time. This approach aligns with the participatory ethos of PALAR by highlighting relational accountability and collective sense-making.

Within the present study, these theoretical perspectives establish the conceptual foundation for using creative and participatory methods during the pre-project engagement phase. The walking video and palindrome poems serve as dialogic artefacts that enable participants to reflect collectively on their experiences of collaboration. By promoting shared interpretation and creative expression, these methods exemplify the principles of dialogic inquiry, reflexive praxis, and participatory learning that support the study.

Methodology

This study used a reflexive and participatory methodological approach, using arts-based practices to uncover knowledge that is "harder to reach through more traditional approaches" (Kramer, 2022, p. 4). Inspired by recent contributions to qualitative enquiry, which highlight that arts-based research "creates opportunities for new insights, empathy, and connection" (Leavy, 2020, p. 15), the process was designed not only to gather insights but also to promote trust, reciprocity, and dialogic relationships among participants. Our reflexive journey was both a method and an enactment, exploring pre-project engagement through relational, dialogic spaces. Puri (2023) suggested incorporating creative non-fiction elements to frame and reflect on researchers' own experiences, grounding academic inquiry in personal reflexivity. This approach sought to disrupt hierarchical dynamics and foster ethical reciprocity among the participants.

Research Paradigm

This study is conducted within an interpretivist paradigm that values reflexivity, the co-construction of knowledge, and creative engagement. Arts-based research practices are utilised throughout, with creative activities serving as tools for carrying out the research itself rather than solely for communication (Craig & Arezou, 2024). This approach aligns with participatory action traditions that emphasise partnerships and collaborations between researchers and community members. Additionally, arts-based research aims to challenge conventional research paradigms by emphasising collaboration, equity, and action-oriented outcomes (McPherson et al., 2024).

Participants

The data were generated during the finalisation phase of a pre-project for a National Research Grant from the NFRF. Participants comprised the project's KAS, which included eight members: university academics, engagement staff, and community-based practitioners from a First Nation group in South Africa. We employed purposeful sampling as the data generation strategy and used a short video capturing the team's physical movement through school spaces, and palindrome poems to generate data.

Data Gathering Cycles

The data generation process unfolded through two interconnected cycles of creative involvement. In the first, we created a short film that showed the KAS team's collective walk-through of the school spaces. The

making of the film itself was participatory: team members took turns walking, highlighting details of importance, and operating the camera, ensuring that no single perspective dominated the visual record. The footage captured not only spaces such as classrooms, playgrounds, and corridors but also gestures, conversations, and the ambient sounds of children and the environment.

Once the film was finished, it was screened in a collective session where all participants watched it together. This act of viewing as a group was as significant as the filming because it allowed participants to see the school space in a new light through each other's eyes. Comments, laughter, and silences during the screening became key to the interpretive process, revealing insights not apparent during the walk itself. The shared viewing thus created a space of dialogic recognition, where participants could affirm, challenge, or build upon each other's impressions before proceeding to further reflection.

This approach aligns with emerging research on walking video, which has been shown to offer "a multi-sensory account of place and experience that cannot be reduced to words alone" (Broadhead, 2024, p. 12). This method fostered attentiveness to atmospheres, textures, and movements within the school setting, thereby emphasising forms of knowledge rooted in the body. As Strand et al. (2024, p. 5) observed, creative participatory practices can reveal "tacit and affective knowledge that often remains hidden in conventional qualitative research," making embodied engagement central to reflexive inquiry.

To extend this engagement, the team engaged in reflective narrative writing as a way to verbalise and deepen our experiences of the video. Each participant wrote a short narrative in response to both the walk and the collective screening, blending sensory impressions, memories, and emotions. This additional layer allowed feelings and observations to be expressed through words, creating a dialogic link between embodied practice and collective interpretation. In this way, the film was not just a static data artefact but became a catalyst for layered reflection and meaning making.

The second cycle expanded this commitment to creative practice by involving the participants in co-creating palindrome poems. These poems were seen as dialogic artefacts through which meaning could be layered and shared. A palindrome poem, unlike traditional verse, is composed so that it can be read forwards and backwards, with the second half echoing, reframing, or even challenging the first. This reverse writing process demands careful attention to rhythm and word arrangement, ensuring that the mirrored lines offer new insights when read backwards. For instance, a line expressing doubt may, when reversed, imply resolution, allowing the poem to contain multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings within the same structure.

Poetic inquiry has been recognised for its ability to deepen lived experience through rhythm, imagery, and metaphor, making the unsayable sayable (Li, 2025). By working with palindrome texts that reflect themselves, we deliberately disrupted linear research language and highlighted reciprocity. The process of composing and reversing lines required collaboration and dialogue among participants because each person contributed words or phrases that would work in both directions. In this way, the form itself embodied the principle of mutuality; every word needed to make sense not only in its original orientation but also in its mirrored form.

Notably, the process of writing palindrome poems also proved empowering for the poet. Because the structure required contributors to view their own words from multiple perspectives, participants were able to reclaim their voice, craft their experiences creatively, and embed personal meaning into collective dialogue. As one participant reflected, the act of reversing lines felt like "seeing myself reflected through others' words," demonstrating how the technique facilitated both individual expression and shared understanding.

In this way, co-creating poems became both an analytical tool and a participatory act of collective reflection. Together, the walking video and palindrome poems demonstrate how embodied and poetic

forms of engagement can enhance reflexivity, build relational trust, and generate artefacts that both document and transform the experience of collaboration.

Analytical Process

The analytical process started with a familiarisation phase. Members of the KAS repeatedly watched the walking video, read the palindrome poems, and revisited the reflective narratives produced after the engagement process. During this stage, each participant made brief reflexive notes capturing sensory impressions, emotional responses, and symbolic meanings that emerged from the artefacts. These notes helped participants attend not only to the explicit content of the artefacts but also to the affective and relational dimensions of the engagement experience.

Following familiarisation, an initial round of open coding was carried out. Segments of the poems, narrative reflections, and video observations were coded descriptively to capture expressions related to relational dynamics, emotional shifts, spatial awareness, uncertainty, trust-building, and perceptions of collaboration. Coding was performed collaboratively during team discussions, allowing multiple interpretations to emerge and preventing the analysis from reflecting just a single researcher's perspective. These preliminary codes were documented and refined through iterative dialogue among the KAS members.

In the next phase, related codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories. Through repeated cycles of discussion, reflection, and comparison across artefacts, patterns of shared meaning began to emerge. These categories were then synthesised into three overarching themes: collective belonging and relational trust, transformative learning through uncertainty and shared exploration, and initial hesitancy and power asymmetries in engagement. Rather than viewing themes as objective discoveries, they were understood as negotiated interpretations that arose through the collective sense-making of the research team.

To improve the trustworthiness of the analysis, several strategies were included. First, collaborative coding and interpretation ensured that multiple perspectives influenced the analytical process. Second, reflexive journaling allowed participants to critically consider how their own positionalities, expectations, and emotions affected interpretation. Third, the themes were discussed collectively within the KAS group to ensure that the interpretations aligned with participants' lived experiences of the engagement process. These strategies reflect participatory validity principles in qualitative research, which emphasise transparency, reflexivity, and shared ownership of knowledge creation.

By integrating creative artefacts with reflexive thematic analysis, the study aimed to explore both the experiential and relational aspects of participatory engagement. The analytic process therefore became an extension of the project's dialogic methodology, allowing participants to interpret their experiences collaboratively and ensuring that the themes remained rooted in the collective reflections of the group.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed through principles of participatory and relational ethics that emphasise dialogue, mutual accountability, and shared decision-making throughout the research process. The study concentrated on the reflexive engagement of the KAS, whose members actively collaborated in the project rather than being external research participants. As the creative artefacts and reflections emerged from the team's collective engagement, ethical decisions were openly discussed within the group before developing the manuscript.

Informed consent was obtained from all KAS members before including their reflections, narratives, and creative artefacts in the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the planned

publication of findings, and how their contributions would be represented. Because the project focused on collaborative knowledge production, participants had the opportunity to review and approve how their words and creative expressions were incorporated into the manuscript.

Particular attention was given to the ownership and representation of the creative artefacts produced during the engagement process. The walking video and palindrome poems were regarded as collectively created artefacts, and decisions regarding their interpretation and inclusion in the paper were made through dialogue among the contributors. Members of the KAS team expressed a preference to be recognised by name rather than anonymously, viewing authorship as an important form of recognition and ownership of their perspectives. Their inclusion as co-authors therefore reflects the participatory ethos of the project and honours their contributions to the research process.

Ethical practice also involved continuous reflexive discussions about power relations and representation. As the project united university researchers and community practitioners, the team stayed attentive to how institutional authority and research language could influence participation. Ethical decisions, including how artefacts were interpreted, voices represented, and findings communicated, were collectively negotiated through group discussions and reflective dialogue.

These practices align with participatory research principles that emphasise transparency, reflexivity, and shared ownership of knowledge creation. By integrating ethical reflection into the collaborative process itself, the study aimed to ensure that the research remained responsible to the participants whose experiences and creative expressions shaped its development findings.

Findings and Discussion

Thematic Analysis: Artefacts as Relational Mediators

Reflexive thematic analysis identified three interconnected themes: collective belonging and relational trust, transformative learning through uncertainty and shared exploration, and initial hesitancy and power asymmetries in engagement. These themes highlight both the productive and challenging aspects of participatory engagement. They demonstrate how creative artefacts, particularly palindrome poems and reflective narratives, serve as mediating tools through which participants express experiences, negotiate meanings, and reflect on their interactions.

Collective Belonging and Relational Trust

The first theme illustrates the gradual shift from initial silence and uncertainty to a sense of shared belonging and trust. Deidre's palindrome "When the Room Breathed Back" captures this transition, moving from "blank eyes blink back, silent echoes in stiff rows" to "together, we softened the silence." Her accompanying reflection describes how "timid smiles blossomed into genuine curiosity, and hesitant glances transformed into eager gazes."

Jonathan's palindrome "Oasis of Learning" extended this imagery of growth and emergence: "a journey of learning has just begun . . . no expectations—just learning as guide." In his narrative "A Harvest of Promise," he described how "more seeds will be planted through our collaborative efforts to ensure an even greater harvest."

Similarly, Nomthandazo's palindrome highlighted inclusivity and dialogue: "listening to one another at the table and dreams are shared . . . learning that the cup is not empty." Her narrative reflected on learners "from diverse backgrounds and abilities working together in the gardens, their differences becoming a

strength rather than a barrier." Asiphe's palindrome emphasised humility and connection: "acceptance is the key . . . the comfort of being part of something bigger."

Together, these artefacts suggest that relational trust emerged through shared experiences and dialogue. Belonging was expressed not only through words but through gestures, metaphors, and collaborative interactions. These moments illustrate Freire's (1968/1972) argument that dialogue depends on mutual recognition and relational respect.

Transformative Learning Through Uncertainty and Shared Exploration

The second theme highlights how uncertainty and vulnerability became catalysts for learning and reflection. Noluvo's palindrome "A Mirror in the Moment" begins with hesitation—"I wondered if the community would welcome and accept us"—but concludes with gratitude: "what a humbling experience." Her narrative similarly described how initial uncertainty gave way to appreciation of "the warmth, energy, and genuine hospitality" encountered during the visit.

Bruce's palindrome expressed a similar tension: "The excitement of initiating a new project is balanced by the uncertainty in what we will find." His narrative later reflected that "day one might have started shaky, but day two confirmed we were in the right place."

Amy's palindrome also recognised challenges while highlighting community strengths: "in difficult circumstances . . . parents are stepping up . . . learners are bearing the fruit . . . we have so much to learn." Her narrative reinforced this reflection, observing that "this school is getting something right . . . parents and staff are people we can get behind, learn from."

Other artefacts emphasised the importance of dialogue and collective discovery. Oyama's palindrome "A Dream We Shared" reflected how shared engagement fostered connection: "a dream we shared, then walked the land . . . hearts met as hands gave and planned." Derrick's poem "Eco-Pedagogy's Power" linked this experience to ecological metaphors, describing the school community as "a profound ecosystem of change defined by order, care, and respect."

Across these reflections, uncertainty became a productive space for learning. Rather than reinforcing hierarchical roles, it encouraged researchers and participants to engage as co-learners. As Cammarota and Fine (2010) suggested, participatory transformation often emerges through shared vulnerability and reflection.

Initial Hesitancy and Power Asymmetries in Engagement

The final theme examines initial hesitancy and the role of institutional hierarchies during early engagement. Several artefacts captured moments of uncertainty at the start of the interaction. Deidre's palindrome began with "silent echoes in stiff rows," while Bruce described how "day one might have started shaky." Noluvo also reflected on questioning "if the community would welcome and accept us," and Asiphe described praying for guidance during the first engagement.

However, these artefacts also demonstrate how such asymmetries began to change during the engagement process. Oyama's palindrome highlighted the importance of shared physical presence, shifting from "a dream we shared" to "land we walked." Nomthandazo's narrative observed that participants "engaged freely during the workshop, using their mother tongue," allowing community voices to influence the dialogue. Amy's reflection similarly recognised learning from community members, stating that "this school is getting something right . . . parents and staff are people we can get behind, learn from."

These examples show that power asymmetries were not eliminated but actively negotiated through dialogue and shared activity. As Hall and Tandon (2017) argued, participatory research becomes transformative when authority over knowledge production is gradually redistributed through collaborative engagement.

Methodological Contribution: Creative Artefacts and Participatory Validity

Incorporating palindromes and reflective narratives into the analysis was more than an aesthetic choice; it demonstrated how creative artefacts can serve as meaningful relational mediators in participatory research. These artefacts enabled participants to encode their experiences in layered, reversible, and metaphorical forms that resisted being reduced to linear or overly rationalised narratives. In doing so, they highlighted what Chilisa (2012) called decolonial validity expressions: ways of knowing and representing rooted in community aesthetics, oral poetics, and embodied forms of knowledge rather than abstract academic jargon. This created a methodological space where the rhythm of local idioms, the cadence of shared silences, and the affective power of memory could be incorporated into the analytic process as valid forms of knowledge.

Methodologically, using palindromes and reflective narratives broadens the range of participatory creative tools. Photovoice and cellphilm, for instance, are now well-established in participatory visual research and are widely recognised for their capacity to democratise knowledge production by prioritising participant perspectives through images and narratives (de Lange et al., 2007; Mitchell, 2011). Although these methods emphasise the visual, the palindrome provides a textual equivalent: concise, reversible, and co-created, embodying the principles of reciprocity and circularity in both form and content. Poetic inquiry enables researchers to make the unsayable sayable by expressing affective and embodied experiences through metaphor, rhythm, and imagery (Leavy, 2020).

By anchoring analysis in these artefacts, the study challenged extractive tendencies in qualitative research that often view participants merely as data sources. Instead, participants were acknowledged and engaged as co-analysts and meaning-makers, reclaiming agency over how their voices were portrayed. This aligns with Denzin and Lincoln's (2018) call for qualitative inquiry that is both emancipatory and decolonial, emphasising collaborative authorship and ethical responsibility. Importantly, the palindrome's reversible structure did not just aestheticise the engagement—it embodied the principle of reciprocity by encouraging readings that reflected back on themselves, mirroring the iterative cycles of reflection and dialogue that characterised the group's process.

In this way, creative artefacts such as palindromes became epistemic bridges between embodied experience and analytical abstraction. They conveyed what Finley (2011) described as the politics of representation in arts-based research: the power to change whose stories are told, how they are told, and what counts as legitimate knowledge. Consequently, the integration of palindromes and reflective narratives into analysis both broadened the methodological toolkit of participatory research. It demonstrated a form of knowledge-making that was dialogic, reflexive, and fundamentally relational.

Action Implications and Future Pathways

The analysis indicates three specific implications for participatory practice, each emphasising a methodological approach that goes beyond what is typically captured in traditional qualitative methods. First, trust-building depends on artefacts—metaphors, poems, and stories that convey relational affect. Unlike standard fieldnotes or transcripts, these artefacts are not just by-products of research but form part of the relational contract between participants and researchers. They serve as vessels of memory and imagination, producing what Santos (2014, p. 8) described as "epistemologies of the South," where knowledge arises from collective creativity and symbolic exchange. By prioritising artefacts as the core

medium of dialogue, trust was built not through verbal assurances but through the shared act of creating and interpreting together (Leavy, 2020).

Second, uncertainty must be embraced as an epistemic resource, not dismissed as a methodological flaw. In many research traditions, uncertainty is regarded as a methodological obstacle that must be resolved to produce valid knowledge. However, in participatory praxis, uncertainty functions as a condition of possibility, it offers a space where alternative logics can emerge, and relational accountability can flourish. Rowlands (2021) described this as the productive ambiguity of insider–outsider dynamics, where the lack of complete clarity sustains dialogue. Likewise, Smith (2012) contended that decolonial methodologies should accommodate unfinishedness because knowledge itself remains provisional, evolving with context and relational encounters. In this project, moments of hesitation or narrative contradiction were not mistakes but invitations to reconsider what constitutes knowledge, to honour plural truths rather than reduce them to singular accounts.

Third, power asymmetries require continual negotiation, including intentionally emphasising community languages, aesthetics, and categories of knowledge. This goes beyond merely inviting participants into pre-established methodological spaces; it involves reshaping the very basis of inquiry. As Chilisa and Ntseane (2010) observed, Indigenous feminist frameworks demand those methodologies affirm forms of expression rooted in local cosmologies and oral traditions. In practice, this meant placing isiXhosa idioms and ecological metaphors at the centre of meaning-making, not as translations of English categories but as epistemic anchors in their own right. By doing so, the project rejected what Tuck and Yang (2014, p. 10) referred to as the "settler move to innocence," where participation risks concealing deeper structures of domination. Instead, it underlined an ongoing, negotiated redistribution of epistemic authority, in which KAS members determined not only what was said but also how it should be developed.

In the Eastern Cape context, these implications crystallise in the Calabash framework, extended not only as metaphor but as method. Traditionally a vessel that holds diverse ingredients together, the calabash here symbolises methodological hospitality; it accommodates plurality without dissolving differences, generating nourishment from the combination of poetic, narrative, ecological, and dialogic contributions. Rangana et al. (2025) suggested that such frameworks are essential in contexts of ecological precarity, where knowledge must not only document but also heal, restore, and connect. By grounding participatory practice in this living metaphor, the project offers a decolonial model of engagement that values reciprocity, recognises uncertainty as fertile, and deliberately reconfigures the hierarchies of knowledge production.

Closing Reflection

By integrating walking videos, reflective narratives, and palindrome poems into a reflexive thematic analysis, this study demonstrates how dialogic and decolonial praxis can create more equitable ways of pre-project engagement. These artefacts functioned not as mere embellishments but as relational mediators, humanising the research experience and allowing participants to express their experiences in ways that honoured affect, embodiment, and plurality. In doing so, they revealed tacit aspects of trust, highlighted the importance of uncertainty, and necessitated the ongoing negotiation of power imbalances.

The methodological contribution lies in demonstrating that artefacts, whether poetic, visual, or narrative, expand the range of participatory practices beyond familiar tools such as photovoice, introducing innovative modes of co-creation that connect with local epistemologies. This study, therefore, reinforces the argument that schools, and communities should not only engage in research but also actively define, represent, and disseminate it. Such an approach aligns with the Calabash as a method: a vessel of reciprocity where diverse knowledges can be combined, circulated, and returned in nourishing form.

In this sense, the work embodies Freire's (1968/1972) vision of education as the practice of freedom: a collective journey of reflection and action in which knowledge is created with, rather than for, communities. More broadly, it demonstrates that participatory practice, when grounded in decolonial ethics, is not merely about inclusion but about reconfiguring the very terms of knowledge-making towards justice, plurality, and mutual care.

Conclusion

This study has examined how participatory, creative, and decolonial methods, walking video, reflective narratives, and palindrome poems, can transform pre-project engagement in school–community collaborations. At its core, the project shows that when research is seen not as simply extracting data but as co-creating meaning, the resulting knowledge becomes more relational, diverse, and emancipatory. The analysis revealed how artefacts of collective practice can humanise research encounters, highlight embodied and emotional aspects of experience, and challenge the unequal power dynamics that often characterise interactions between universities and marginalised communities.

A key contribution of this work is its methodological experimentation. By integrating visual, narrative, and poetic practices, the study broadens the range of participatory methods beyond traditional formats like focus groups or photovoice. Walking video engaged participants in a multi-sensory experience with place, capturing atmospheres and movements that resist being reduced to words alone (Broadhead, 2024). Reflective narratives served as a textual bridge, allowing embodied impressions to be verbalised and collectively interpreted. Palindrome poems introduced a novel form of dialogic artefact, disrupting linear research language and encouraging participants to inscribe personal meanings in reversible, layered texts. Collectively, these practices demonstrate the creative potential of combining artistic and analytical approaches to capture knowledge that is tacit, affective, and embodied.

This methodological contribution has ethical significance. In settings shaped by historical marginalisation and systemic inequality, extractive research practices have too often silenced community voices or treated them as objects of study. Conversely, the artefacts produced in this project returned authorship to the participants themselves. When the KAS team requested that their names be included alongside their contributions, they expressed a refusal to be anonymised and an insistence on recognition as knowledge-makers. This aligns with Chilisa's (2012) call for decolonial validity, where legitimacy is based on alignment with community aesthetics and protocols rather than external academic standards. In this way, the project redefines research not only as a process of knowing but also as an ethical act of recognition.

The findings also provide meaningful insights for future school–community collaborations. Trust-building appeared to be both delicate and essential. Silence, hesitation, and nervous glances in the early stages of the workshop indicated the influence of institutional authority, but they also held the potential for change. Through creative artefacts, participants could gradually shift from guardedness to openness, from being "researched" to becoming co-authors of meaning. Uncertainty similarly proved to be not a barrier but a resource. Palindrome poems, with their reversible structure, demonstrated how ambiguity can encourage reflection and prevent premature closure. For practitioners and researchers alike, this underscores the importance of viewing uncertainty as a productive space rather than eliminating it in pursuit of methodological tidiness.

Furthermore, the project shows that participatory engagement demands ongoing awareness of power. No method, regardless of how innovative or collaborative, automatically removes asymmetry. What truly matters is how those imbalances are recognised, negotiated, and reshaped through practice. In this study, intentional efforts to prioritise participant language, aesthetics, and authorship helped create a more equitable research experience. For school–community collaborations, this indicates that successful engagement should be assessed not solely by procedural inclusion but by the extent to which participants can influence the terms, categories, and outcomes of the process.

The Calabash framework provides a powerful metaphor and approach for advancing these lessons. Like the calabash that contains diverse ingredients in one vessel, participatory engagement can serve as a container for multiple forms of knowledge poetic, narrative, ecological, dialogic, without forcing them into uniformity. In the Eastern Cape context, this approach aligns with local ways of sharing and reciprocity. More broadly, it offers a model for participatory practice that fosters mutual understanding, redistributes knowledge within communities, and promotes ongoing collaboration.

Looking ahead, several directions for further inquiry surface. First, the integration of creative artefacts in participatory research remains insufficiently explored and calls for systematic development. Future projects could experiment with other poetic forms, digital storytelling, or collaborative theatre, assessing how different modalities facilitate varied types of relational knowledge. Second, questions of authorship and circulation demand ongoing attention; how can co-created artefacts be shared beyond the research encounter without reinforcing extractive dynamics? Third, exploring the potential to scale such practices into formal educational programmes is promising, especially in contexts where school–community relations have been historically marred by mistrust.

Ultimately, this study affirms that participatory practice is not only about methodology but also about justice. Engaging with communities in ways that respect their knowledge, aesthetics, and voices is a form of epistemic redress. The artefacts produced in this project demonstrate the power of creative, dialogic methods to humanise engagement, redistribute authority, and create spaces where diverse ways of knowing can thrive. In doing so, they promote a vision of research as a collective journey of reflection and action, aligning with Freire's (1968/1972) idea of education as the practice of freedom.

In conclusion, the study does not claim to present a definitive model for participatory engagement. Instead, it offers a set of practices, reflections, and possibilities that others may adapt, develop, or challenge. What is evident is that pre-project engagement is important; it sets the tone for collaboration, builds the conditions for trust, and influences the direction of research partnerships. When approached with creativity, reflexivity, and a decolonial commitment, such engagement can do more than lay the groundwork for research it can itself, become a space for transformation.

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Popular Music as Epistemic Justice: Toward Inclusive Poetry Pedagogy in South African Classrooms[2]

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Abstract

This study explores the role of popular music in promoting epistemic justice and inclusive poetry pedagogy in South African Grade 10 English classrooms. Traditional poetry instruction often marginalises learners' cultural knowledge by privileging canonical texts, limiting access to literary meaning-making and reinforcing hierarchical knowledge structures. Drawing on a decolonial and social justice framework, this action research study engaged learners in iterative cycles where carefully selected popular songs were paired with poems to create meaningful connections between learners' cultural worlds and literary texts. The study involved five action research cycles in which poems were paired with culturally familiar songs in order to scaffold learners' understanding of poetic devices, themes, and tone. Data were generated through multiple methods, including open-ended questionnaires and classroom activities, and were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings indicate that integrating popular music legitimised learners' cultural experiences, disrupted exclusionary pedagogical practices, and fostered equitable access to literary interpretation. Learners demonstrated enhanced cognitive engagement, critical reflection, and appreciation of poetic forms, language, and themes. Learner responses further indicated that music functioned as a cognitive and affective scaffold, enabling them to connect abstract literary concepts with familiar cultural texts. The study further highlights the transformative potential of culturally responsive teaching practices that foreground learners' epistemic contributions, challenge traditional hierarchies of knowledge, and enable inclusive literacy learning. By centring learners' voices and lived experiences, this research provides evidence that popular music can function both as a pedagogical tool and as a vehicle for epistemic justice, supporting social change and contributing to efforts to decolonise literature education in South African schools.

Keywords: popular music, epistemic justice, inclusive literacy pedagogy, poetry, decolonial education, South Africa

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Introduction

Teaching poetry in South African schools (and globally) remains deeply shaped by inherited colonial and Eurocentric curricular traditions that privilege canonical literary forms while marginalising learners' cultural knowledge, linguistic repertoires, and lived realities (Ahmed, 2025). Within such pedagogical contexts, poetry is often positioned as an elite or culturally distant genre, accessible primarily through dominant interpretive frameworks that reflect Western epistemologies (Mavhiza & Prozesky, 2020). As a result, many learners experience poetry as disengaging, alienating, and disconnected from their everyday worlds (Genis & Byrne, 2024). This exclusion is not merely pedagogical but epistemic because it reflects broader hierarchies of knowledge in which certain forms of meaning-making are treated as inherently superior, while learners' resources are rendered peripheral or illegitimate (Cooper, 2020; Genis & Byrne, 2024; Mavhiza & Prozesky, 2020).

Such dynamics reproduce epistemic injustice in the literature classroom by restricting who is recognised as a legitimate knower and whose interpretive voice matters. In multilingual and multicultural South African classrooms, where learners' identities are shaped by diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and popular cultural engagements, the continued privileging of Eurocentric literary norms reinforces inequities in access to literary meaning-making. Learners' musical tastes, home languages, and interpretive practices are often excluded from formal literature study, limiting their agency and participation and sustaining structural hierarchies embedded in schooling (Clement, 2024; Iweuno et al., 2024).

Within educational contexts, epistemic justice refers to the fair recognition of learners as legitimate knowers whose knowledge, experiences, and interpretive perspectives are valued within the learning process (Duchkova & Leventon, 2023). When classroom practices privilege only dominant literary traditions or authoritative interpretations, learners' resources are often marginalised, resulting in limited participation in knowledge construction. This article draws on a broader doctoral study investigating the potential of popular music to teach poetry in an English Home Language classroom in a culturally and linguistically diverse South African secondary school (Maniraj, 2025). By incorporating learners' knowledge and musical preferences, popular music disrupts exclusionary approaches, supports epistemic justice, and fosters more equitable access to interpretation. As a culturally resonant medium, music offers familiar entry points into poetic devices and themes, enabling learners to bridge canonical texts and lived experiences. Grounded in social constructivist and decolonial frameworks, this research explores how integrating popular music into poetry pedagogy supports engagement, collaboration, and critical reflection. Through participatory meaning-making practices, learners are positioned as active co-constructors of interpretation. Music thus becomes a mediating resource through which learners negotiate historical and contemporary realities, connect poetry to social issues, and develop interpretive confidence.

The findings presented in this article draw from five cycles of action research, in which learners engaged with selected poems alongside carefully chosen songs. Data were generated through questionnaires and classroom activities, allowing for triangulation and rich insight into learners' cognitive critical responses. The findings suggest that popular music not only enhances learners' comprehension and enjoyment of poetry but also fosters collaborative learning, reflective thinking, and critical engagement with social and historical themes. By centring learners' epistemic agency, this study demonstrates that popular music can function as a tool for social and educational transformation, challenging hierarchical and exclusionary practices in poetry teaching. It contributes to discourse on inclusive and decolonial pedagogy by offering practical strategies for teachers seeking to promote epistemic justice, culturally responsive literacy education, and socially transformative learning in South African classrooms.

While previous studies have explored culturally responsive pedagogy and the use of music in education, this study offers a distinct contribution by examining how popular music can function specifically as a tool for epistemic justice within the teaching of poetry in a South African Grade 10 English Home Language classroom. Rather than using music merely to increase engagement, the aim of the study is to demonstrate how music can operate as an interpretive bridge that legitimises learners' cultural knowledge as a valid

resource for literary analysis. By integrating music into action research cycles, the study provides evidence of how learners' interpretive confidence and engagement are strengthened when their cultural practices are recognised in poetry instruction. In doing so, the research shows how popular music can disrupt hierarchical distinctions between canonical texts and learners' knowledge in the South African secondary school context.

Literature Review

Popular Music and Epistemic Justice in Education

Epistemic justice can be understood as the fair recognition and inclusion of diverse knowledges in educational spaces, and has become increasingly central to decolonial and socially just pedagogical discourse (Duchkova & Leventon, 2023). However, due to South Africa's history, the educational system has suffered from epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice in education refers to situations where individuals' knowledge, experiences, or perspectives are unfairly dismissed or undervalued because of their social identities, including race, gender, or socioeconomic status (Omodan, 2023). In educational contexts, this injustice limits learners' access to knowledge and negatively shapes their learning experiences. It can appear through biased curricula, discriminatory teaching practices, and unequal access to educational resources and opportunities (Omodan, 2023). Mainstream curricula frequently prioritise dominant cultural narratives while overlooking the histories, contributions, and lived experiences of marginalised communities (Harvey & Russell-Mundine, 2019), resulting in learners from marginalised groups experiencing epistemic injustice when their ideas, questions, and contributions are dismissed or overlooked during classroom interactions (Omodan, 2023). In South African classrooms, literature teaching has historically privileged Eurocentric canonical traditions, marginalising learners' cultural and linguistic worlds and reinforcing exclusionary hierarchies of knowledge (Heleta, 2016). To resolve this challenge in the poetry classroom, integrating culturally relevant content, such as popular music, offers a means of redressing these imbalances by validating learners as epistemic agents whose interpretive frameworks are legitimate and valuable (Genis & Byrne, 2024; Iwuanyamwu, 2023).

Popular music has been widely recognised as a powerful medium through which cognitive, affective, and cultural engagement can be mediated in classroom contexts (Campbell, 2018). Music resonates with learners' sociocultural identities, providing familiar structures through which abstract literary concepts, such as metaphor, tone, rhythm, and theme, can be explored (Hargreaves et al., 2021). When learners engage with lyrics that reflect their cultural worlds, they are able to access literary analysis through interpretive pathways grounded in lived experience.

Studies suggest that learners demonstrate enhanced comprehension and higher-order thinking when canonical poetry is connected to music that is meaningful within their cultural repertoires (Campbell, 2018). Genis and Byrne (2024) and Iwuanyamwu (2023), for example, argued that linking content meaningful to learners, such as contemporary songs, with canonical poetry enables learners to bridge historical, linguistic, and cultural distance, thereby legitimising their knowledge and positioning them as active participants in meaning-making rather than passive recipients of authoritative interpretations.

Inclusive Literacy Pedagogy and Cultural Relevance

Inclusive literacy pedagogy foregrounds equitable participation in language and literature learning, particularly for learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Lim, 2024). Central to inclusive approaches is the recognition that learners' identities, experiences, and cultural resources are not supplementary but foundational to engagement and learning outcomes. In South Africa, inclusive literacy practices are especially urgent given the enduring effects of apartheid-era inequalities, where learners' home languages and cultural knowledges have historically been undervalued within formal schooling (Heleta, 2016).

Incorporating popular music into poetry instruction supports inclusive pedagogy by providing multimodal pathways for interpretation. Music offers learners cognitive and affective entry points into texts, allowing them to engage with poetry through listening, discussion, emotional resonance, and cultural familiarity (Mavhiza & Prozesky, 2020). Such multimodal engagement expands access to meaning-making, particularly for learners who may find traditional print-based approaches limiting.

Moreover, music-based pedagogies align with constructivist understandings of learning as socially mediated and collaboratively constructed. Analysing lyrics alongside poems encourages dialogue, negotiation of meaning, and interpretive exploration, fostering critical literacy skills and learner agency (Vygotsky, 1978). These strategies advance epistemic justice by ensuring that learners' cultural perspectives are integral to literary interpretation rather than marginal or tokenised.

Decolonial Perspectives on Poetry Teaching

Decolonial scholarship in education emphasises the disruption of Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies and the validation of marginalised cultural knowledge systems (Heleta, 2016). Within poetry education, this requires recognising learners' musical, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds as legitimate interpretive frameworks through which poetry can be understood. Campbell (2018) and Powell and Smith (2024) argued that popular music, as a culturally situated practice, challenges traditional literary hierarchies and contributes to socially just pedagogy by unsettling distinctions between "high" and everyday cultural texts.

Pairing protest poetry with contemporary songs about youth empowerment, for instance, allows learners to contextualise texts within lived realities and ongoing social struggles (Titi, 2025). Such pedagogical pairings foster critical engagement with historical and contemporary issues, enabling learners to view poetry not as detached from society but as deeply connected to questions of identity, agency, and social change.

Scholarship indicates that popular music offers significant cognitive, affective, and cultural affordances for enhancing poetry teaching. By integrating music into classroom practice, teachers can foster epistemic justice, inclusive literacy pedagogy, and decolonial transformation. However, Meiklejohn et al. (2021) indicated that systematic classroom-based research in South African contexts remains limited, particularly regarding learners' responses and literacy outcomes. This study addresses this gap by examining how popular music can function as a vehicle for epistemic justice and socially transformative poetry pedagogy.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a multi-layered theoretical and conceptual framework that situates popular music as a pedagogical resource for epistemic justice, inclusive literacy practice, and decolonial transformation. Together, these perspectives explain how integrating learners' cultural experiences into poetry instruction can challenge dominant knowledge hierarchies, support equitable access to meaning-making, and foster socially transformative learning.

Central to this framework is epistemic justice, which concerns whose knowledge counts and who is recognised as a legitimate knower in educational spaces. Epistemic injustice occurs when learners' voices and interpretive resources are undervalued, including testimonial injustice, where contributions are discredited, and hermeneutical injustice, where learners lack access to interpretive tools reflecting their experiences (Duchkova & Leventon, 2023). In South Africa, Eurocentric curricula often marginalise learners' cultural knowledge, limiting agency (Fataar, 2025). Addressing this requires pedagogical practices that recognise learners' cultural, linguistic, and musical resources as valid foundations for literary interpretation, creating spaces where their experiences and texts are treated as legitimate interpretive resources. This study understands epistemic justice as the recognition of learners as legitimate knowers whose cultural knowledge, linguistic repertoires, and interpretive perspectives contribute meaningfully to literary meaning-making in the classroom. In practical terms, this involves creating pedagogical spaces where

learners' experiences and cultural texts are treated as valid interpretive resources rather than peripheral knowledge.

Inclusive literacy pedagogy intersects with epistemic justice by emphasising learning environments in which all learners can participate meaningfully. Such pedagogies affirm learners' identities and draw on their cultural and social repertoires, enabling deeper and more authentic engagement with texts (Wang, 2025). In this study, popular music serves as a culturally meaningful interpretive resource that connects learners' everyday worlds with poetry. Through music, learners explore figurative language, theme, tone, and structure in ways that resonate with lived realities, fostering both comprehension and engagement.

Decolonial theory further strengthens this approach by challenging colonial knowledge hierarchies embedded in curricula and pedagogical traditions. Decolonial scholarship advocates dismantling Western-dominated epistemologies and legitimising Indigenous, local, and popular cultural knowledges (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). In South Africa, decolonial approaches emphasise curriculum transformation that is context-sensitive, dialogical, and shaped by learners' cultural worlds rather than treating them as peripheral.

Finally, a social constructivist lens underpins these frameworks by viewing learning as a socially mediated process in which meaning is co-constructed through interaction, dialogue, and cultural resources (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, learners collaboratively interpret poems alongside musical texts, drawing on shared cultural repertoires to negotiate meaning. This validates learners' epistemic contributions, aligns with decolonial aims, and fosters inclusive, participatory literacy engagement.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed an action research design to investigate how the integration of popular music can support inclusive poetry pedagogy in South African Grade 10 English Home Language classrooms. Action research was selected because it enables teacher-researchers to systematically examine challenges arising in their own classrooms, implement targeted pedagogical interventions, and evaluate their effects through iterative cycles of inquiry (Burns, 2015; Koshy et al., 2011).

Action research was particularly appropriate for this study because poetry teaching in many South African classrooms remains dominated by formal, teacher-centred approaches that may marginalise learners whose linguistic and cultural experiences differ from traditional literary norms. Following the cyclical action research model proposed by Kemmis et al. (2014), the study proceeded through five iterative cycles, each structured around the four core phases of:

- Planning
- Acting
- Observing
- Reflecting.

This cyclical design ensured that the intervention was continually refined based on learner engagement, classroom interaction, and evidence generated in each cycle. Baseline data were collected before Cycle 1 to determine learners' prior responses to and experiences with music and poetry.

Action Research Cycles

The intervention was structured as a sequence of five action research cycles, each designed to progressively build learners' understanding and analytical skills in poetry through the integration of music. The poems used in the study formed part of a prescribed list used by teachers in the district (immediate surroundings in which the school is located). Each cycle paired a specific poem with a contemporary song that shared

thematic or stylistic elements, facilitating comparisons between the two texts to engage learners more deeply with poetic concepts.

The first cycle introduced learners to figures of speech using Katy Perry's (2010) song "Firework" as an accessible entry point. Learners listened to the song and identified examples of metaphor, simile, and imagery within the lyrics. These figurative devices were then connected to those found in short poetic extracts, fostering an understanding of how language conveys emotion and meaning. To consolidate learning, learners wrote descriptive paragraphs explaining how the song's figurative language contributed to its message. Assessment criteria focused on learners' ability to correctly identify figures of speech, explain their effects, and express ideas clearly in writing. Analysis of these responses revealed that while most learners could recognise figures of speech, many found it challenging to articulate their significance, indicating the need for more scaffolded analysis in subsequent cycles.

Learners' identification of figures of speech was evaluated using a simple analytic rubric developed for the study. Responses were assessed according to three criteria: (1) correct identification of the literary device, (2) explanation of its effect or meaning within the text, and (3) clarity of written expression. Each criterion was evaluated on a 3-point scale (accurate, partially accurate, or inaccurate). Because the tasks formed part of normal classroom learning activities, they were assessed by the teacher-researcher but were not included in learners' formal academic grades. To enhance credibility, samples of learner responses and marking criteria were reviewed by a colleague experienced in English language teaching who acted as a critical friend to ensure consistency and fairness in the interpretation of learners' answers.

Building on this insight, the second cycle employed Shakespeare's (1609/n.d.) "Sonnet 18" alongside Bruno Mars' (2010) "Just the Way You Are" to deepen learners' analytical skills through comparative work. Learners examined similarities and differences between the poem and the song with particular attention to themes of love, structure, and figurative language. They completed short written responses explaining how both texts expressed similar ideas in different forms. Assessment criteria evaluated thematic understanding, structural analysis, and the quality of interpretation. Findings showed increased engagement but also highlighted that some learners remained at a descriptive rather than interpretative level, suggesting further support was needed to connect texts to personal meaning.

The third cycle addressed this by focusing on the poem "a young man's thoughts before june 16th" by Fhazel Johennesse (n.d.) paired with, "We Are Young" by fun. (2011). Learners discussed the context and message of both texts and wrote personal responses relating the themes of youth, identity, and aspiration to their own experiences. Assessment emphasised learners' ability to interpret themes, use textual evidence, and express personal insight. This cycle demonstrated improved interpretative ability and greater learner confidence, although challenges remained in analysing tone and imagery, which became the focus of the next cycle.

In the fourth cycle, learners explored "Silver" by Walter de la Mare (1913/n.d.) in relation to Toploader's (2000) "Dancing in the Moonlight." Classroom discussions centred on imagery and tone, with learners subsequently writing narrative paragraphs inspired by the mood and imagery of the texts. Assessment criteria included identification and interpretation of imagery, recognition of tone, and creative use of descriptive language. Results indicated learners were developing more sophisticated analytical skills, connecting abstract poetic concepts with familiar sensory experiences through the musical pairing.

The final cycle paired Alice Walker's (1970/n.d.) "Women" with Alicia Keys' (2012) "Girl on Fire," concentrating on tone, theme, diction, and attitude, particularly representations of strength and resilience. Learners reflected on how music influenced their understanding of the poem by writing reflective paragraphs. Assessment focused on thematic interpretation, textual evidence, and depth of reflection. This cycle revealed that learners gained greater confidence and ability in poetic analysis, with many articulating the supportive role music played in their comprehension and engagement.

Throughout these cycles, assessment of learner work and classroom interactions generated ongoing evidence that guided the planning and refinement of subsequent lessons. Early challenges with analytical explanation led to scaffolding tasks that gradually encouraged deeper interpretation and personal connection. This iterative process embodies the reflective cycle fundamental to action research, wherein classroom practice is continually adapted in response to emerging data.

Aligned with transformative goals, the intervention sought to position learners as active meaning-makers by valuing their cultural experiences with music. By integrating music into poetry instruction, the study aimed to foster a more inclusive and participatory classroom where learners' voices and experiences informed the development of critical literacy skills. The cyclical approach ensured that pedagogical decisions were grounded in learners' demonstrated needs, contributing to a socially responsive and learner-centred practice.

The selection of predominantly American popular songs for this intervention was intentional and pedagogically grounded in the lived cultural realities of South African Grade 10 learners. Although the songs originate outside the local context, they form part of the global musical repertoire that many South African adolescents engage with through social media, streaming platforms, and peer cultures. In this way, the songs functioned as familiar interpretive resources that learners could draw on to access poetic concepts such as tone, metaphor, theme, and voice. Rather than positioning literary knowledge as belonging only to traditional or elite cultural forms, the integration of popular music recognised learners' existing cultural capital and legitimised their experiences as meaningful entry points into poetry interpretation. This approach aligns with the transformative aims of educational research for social change because it challenges exclusionary classroom practices and creates more participatory spaces. The selection of songs paired with each poem was guided by learners' expressed familiarity and engagement, as identified through preliminary class discussions and baseline questionnaires. Choosing songs that learners already valued aimed to create meaningful connections between their everyday cultural experiences and the study of poetry. In addition, each song was carefully screened to ensure it contained no vulgar language or biased content, making it appropriate for use in the classroom context. This approach was intended to challenge traditional hierarchical distinctions that often privilege canonical literary texts over learners' lived cultural knowledge, thereby promoting epistemic justice and more inclusive forms of literary engagement.

Baseline questionnaire responses indicated that the majority of learners engaged with these artists and were familiar with the selected songs. In this sense, the musical texts used in the intervention represent meaningful elements of learners' cultural worlds. Decolonial pedagogy does not require the exclusive use of locally produced texts but rather, the validation of learners' existing cultural knowledge as legitimate within the learning process (Titi, 2025). Recognising learners' engagement with global popular music therefore aligns with epistemic justice by acknowledging the cultural identities that shape contemporary youth experience in South Africa.

To ensure the pedagogical coherence and appropriateness of each pairing, the songs and poems were critically reviewed in consultation with colleagues experienced in English language teaching and action research methodologies. These critical friends provided feedback on thematic alignment, accessibility, and potential for analytical exploration, helping to refine the selections to better support learners' comprehension and participation. Their input reinforced the iterative and collaborative nature of the action research cycles, contributing to the credibility and rigor of the study by ensuring that each cycle was responsive to learners' needs while maintaining ethical and educational suitability.

Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of 82 Grade 10 English Home Language learners from two classes at a South African public secondary school. The learners were taught by the researcher, who served simultaneously as the classroom teacher and action research practitioner. The school is a public secondary school located in an urban South African context, specifically KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, and serves learners from diverse linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds. The two Grade 10 English Home Language classes

formed the research site because the researcher was the classroom teacher responsible for teaching the poetry component of the CAPS curriculum during the 2024 academic year.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants. Purposive sampling refers to the deliberate selection of participants who possess specific characteristics relevant to the research purpose (Oranga & Matere, 2023). In this study, Grade 10 English Home Language learners were selected because they were actively engaged in poetry instruction and could therefore provide meaningful insights into the use of popular music as a pedagogical tool for poetry interpretation.

The selection criteria were as follows:

- enrolled in Grade 10 English Home Language during the 2024 academic year
- engaged in poetry instruction as part of the CAPS curriculum
- willing to participate voluntarily
- able to provide assent, with parental consent obtained.

According to Oranga and Matere (2023) this sampling strategy ensured that participants provide information-rich insights into the issue being explore, in this case, the challenges and possibilities of inclusive poetry pedagogy within an authentic classroom context.

Although 82 learners participated at the outset, minor fluctuations occurred across cycles due to subject changes during the academic year. The participant group represented diverse linguistic, cultural, and racial backgrounds, reflecting the multicultural nature of South African schooling and reinforcing the need for inclusive pedagogical approaches.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of autonomy, non-maleficence, and beneficence guided all stages of the study (Arifin, 2018). Participation was voluntary, and learners were informed that non-participation would not affect their academic assessment or classroom standing.

Because the researcher was also the classroom teacher, particular care was taken to ensure that participation was genuinely voluntary. Learners were explicitly informed that participation in the research component of the study was separate from their academic assessment and that choosing not to participate would not affect their grades or classroom relationships. Any learner who preferred not to contribute written reflections for research purposes was permitted to complete alternative classwork without penalty. In addition, written research responses were collected separately from formal classroom assessment tasks to ensure that research participation remained voluntary and non-evaluative.

Written parental consent and learner assent were obtained prior to data generation. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the nature of the intervention, the types of data to be collected, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To protect anonymity, learners' names were not recorded in the reporting of findings, and pseudonyms were used where direct quotations were included. All data were securely stored in password-protected files and locked storage. In accordance with institutional requirements, data will be retained for a minimum of five years and then destroyed through shredding. Gatekeeper permission was obtained from the circuit manager, school principal, and head of department. Ethical clearance was granted by the supervising university prior to implementation.

Because the teacher-researcher occupied a position of authority, classroom interactions were intentionally structured to minimise power imbalances. This was done by creating opportunities for open dialogue where learners could express their views without fear of judgement. For example, learners were encouraged to share ideas in small-group discussions before contributing to whole-class discussions, which helped reduce the pressure associated with teacher-led interactions. The teacher-researcher also adopted

a facilitative role by asking open-ended questions, allowing learners sufficient time to respond, and acknowledging all contributions respectfully. In addition, participation was voluntary, and learners were reminded that their responses would not influence their academic assessment. These strategies helped create a supportive environment in which learners felt more comfortable expressing their perspectives. Learners were encouraged to contribute interpretations freely, participate in shared meaning-making, and engage without fear of judgement. Opportunities for collaborative discussion and learner-led responses were prioritised to support autonomy and inclusion.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As both the classroom teacher and the researcher, I was aware that my beliefs about the value of culturally responsive pedagogy and music-based learning could influence both the design of the intervention and the interpretation of findings. My interest in integrating music into poetry instruction emerged from prior classroom experiences in which learners appeared disengaged when poetry was taught through traditional teacher-centred approaches. Recognising the potential for confirmation bias, several strategies were implemented to enhance reflexivity and analytical rigour. These included maintaining reflective field notes after each action research cycle, inviting a colleague to act as a critical friend in reviewing lesson plans and samples of learner work, and grounding interpretations in direct learner quotations rather than researcher assumptions. These strategies helped ensure that conclusions remained closely connected to learners' actual responses rather than to preconceived expectations about the intervention.

Data Generation Strategies

Open-Ended Questionnaires

Baseline and summative questionnaires were administered to capture learners' attitudes toward poetry and popular music. Open-ended questions enabled learners to express their perspectives in their own words, producing rich qualitative data (Kabir, 2016). Questionnaires were self-administered, with clarification available through a WhatsApp group to address misunderstandings.

A baseline questionnaire was administered to explore learners' prior experiences with music and poetry and to inform the design of the pedagogical intervention. The questionnaire comprised open-ended questions that invited learners to reflect on their engagement with music (e.g. how often they listened to music, how music made them feel, and the perceived benefits and disadvantages of listening to music), as well as their experiences of poetry in the English classroom. Learners were asked to describe their feelings about studying poetry, identify aspects they found exciting or challenging, and reflect on their perceived ability to analyse poetic elements such as tone, imagery, and figurative language. Additional questions explored learners' perceptions of the relationship between poetry and music, including whether they believed music could be used to support the learning of poetry.

Responses to the questionnaire revealed that while music formed a meaningful and emotionally engaging part of learners' everyday lives, their experiences of studying poetry were often characterised by uncertainty and limited confidence in analysing poetic devices. Many learners associated poetry with difficulty and expressed apprehension about interpreting meaning, tone, and figurative language. At the same time, learners recognised similarities between poetry and music, particularly in relation to rhythm, emotion, and storytelling. These responses suggested that music could serve as a familiar and accessible entry point for engaging learners with poetic analysis. In response to these insights, the teaching approach was adapted to incorporate music as a pedagogical tool for exploring poetic concepts. This approach sought to create a more participatory and relatable learning experience that responded directly to learners' expressed needs.

At the conclusion of the intervention, a summative questionnaire was administered to explore how learners experienced the use of music as a pedagogical tool in the study of poetry. The questionnaire included open-ended questions that invited learners to reflect on how the integration of music influenced their

engagement with and understanding of poetry. Learners were asked to describe how the use of music affected their study of poetry, provide adjectives capturing their emotional responses to this approach, and reflect on what they enjoyed or found challenging about learning poetry through music. Additional questions explored whether their perceptions of poetry had changed following the intervention and whether they would like music to continue to be incorporated into poetry lessons.

Learners' responses indicated a positive shift in their perceptions of poetry, with 54 questionnaire responses reporting increased engagement, confidence, and emotional connection when music was incorporated. Most found the approach more enjoyable and relatable, linking poetry to their everyday experiences. Although three learners noted challenges in balancing analysis with listening, overall attitudes towards poetry improved. Learners also expressed a desire for the continued use of music, suggesting that it creates a more engaging and supportive environment and offers meaningful possibilities for reimagining poetry instruction. Questionnaires were completed by learners at home and typically required approximately 30 minutes to complete. Learners responded individually in written form. Because English Home Language learners are accustomed to completing written reflective tasks in English, they were able to respond comfortably in the language of instruction. The teacher-researcher was available via the WhatsApp group to clarify instructions but did not guide responses, ensuring that learners' reflections remained their own.

Documentary Research

Learners completed a range of classroom-based written activities, including descriptive and reflective paragraphs, narrative essays, personal poetry writing, and informal letters. These tasks assessed learners' comprehension, interpretation, and personal engagement with poems and songs. Activities were aligned with the Cognitive Levels for Assessment outlined in the Department of Basic Education's (2011) CAPS document. Documentary evidence, therefore, provided insight into how learners negotiated poetic meaning through music-supported pedagogy. The documentary evidence comprised learners' written responses to the baseline and summative questionnaires, and classroom tasks.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to textual data to identify patterns and meanings. Open coding was used to generate codes inductively, which were then organised into themes corresponding to the research questions. For example, L33's "The song helped me understand what a metaphor means because I hear it in music all the time" was initially coded as *music clarifies figurative language*. This code was later grouped with similar codes such as *lyrics make poetic devices clearer* and *songs help explain meaning* under the broader theme *Music as a Cognitive Scaffold for Literary Meaning*. This analytic process allowed individual learner reflections to be systematically connected to broader interpretive themes emerging across the dataset. Member checking ensured that learners verified interpretations, enhancing confirmability, while triangulation across data sources strengthened credibility. Rich quotes were incorporated to support conclusions.

To enhance analytical rigour, learner responses were first coded inductively to identify recurring patterns in perceptions, interpretations, and emotional engagement with the poetry–music pairings. These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories that corresponded to the study's research focus on cognitive engagement, emotional connection, social awareness, and expressive literacy. To ensure anonymity while maintaining analytical transparency, learner quotations are presented using numerical identifiers (e.g. L1=Learner 1, L2=Learner 2), which correspond to individual participants in the dataset.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Credibility in research ensures that findings are trustworthy and was established in this study through prolonged engagement with learners and triangulation of multiple data sources, including questionnaires and various documentary analyses (Anim-Wright, 2024; Burns, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Confirmability,

which reflects the objectivity of the findings, was supported by transparent reporting of how conclusions were drawn, the inclusion of rich participant quotes, and member checking, where learners verified the accuracy of interpretations (Lim, 2024). Dependability, or the consistency of results across similar contexts, was enhanced through detailed audit trails (Lim, 2024). Finally, transferability, which refers to the extent to which findings can apply in other contexts, was promoted through thick descriptions, providing detailed accounts of the research setting and procedures so that others can assess applicability in different educational environments (Anim-Wright, 2024; Bertram & Christiansen, 2014).

To mitigate power imbalances in the classroom, I fostered a relationship with participants based on mutual respect and inclusivity. Collective pronouns such as “we” and “our” were used to create a sense of shared engagement, and learners were encouraged to exercise autonomy, including collaboratively deciding task deadlines. Opportunities for discussion allowed participants to read poems aloud and express their thoughts and feelings without judgement, with responses recorded and verified for accuracy. Rigour was further ensured through careful documentation of written tasks and the thematic analysis process, enabling transparency and the potential for review by independent observers.

Limitations

Potential limitations of the study included the possibility that learners might misinterpret tasks or questions, a reluctance to disclose honest opinions, and the inherent subjectivity of action research, given that the researcher is both facilitator and observer. To mitigate these concerns, scaffolding was provided during tasks to ensure comprehension, learners were supported through WhatsApp for clarifications, anonymity was assured to encourage openness, and detailed reflexive documentation was maintained to track researcher decisions and observations. While subjectivity is an inherent aspect of action research, it also enables a deeper understanding of learner experiences and the co-construction of knowledge. By documenting processes systematically and linking findings to specific learner responses, the study maintained transparency and credibility.

Findings

Table 1 summarises the key themes identified through thematic analysis and the data sources from which they emerged.

Table 1

Summary of Key Themes

Theme	Description	Data sources
Music as a Cognitive Scaffold	Music helped learners understand figurative language and poetic concepts	Questionnaires, classroom activities
Emotional Engagement	Music enabled learners to connect emotionally with poems	Questionnaires
Social Awareness	Learners reflected on youth identity and social issues	Classroom activities
Expressive Literacy	Learners expressed increased confidence in writing and interpretation	Classroom activities

The findings presented in this study are directly drawn from learners’ classroom activities and questionnaire responses, each systematically coded to ensure scientific rigour. Codes were applied consistently across all data sources, allowing patterns and themes to be traced back to specific evidence. This approach ensured that interpretations were grounded in actual learner contributions rather than general observations.

Music as a Cognitive Scaffold for Literary Meaning

The integration of popular music into poetry instruction significantly enhanced learners' cognitive engagement with literary devices and processes of meaning-making. Baseline questionnaire data indicated that poetry was initially experienced as inaccessible, with 52 learners describing it as "difficult to understand" (e.g. L16, L18, L21, L30, L42) or "boring." (e.g. L5, L16, L 22, L29, L35, L47, L50) Such responses reflect the broader concern that traditional poetry pedagogy often positions learners as passive recipients of canonical knowledge rather than active interpreters (Heleta, 2016).

Following the intervention, learners were given a classroom activity in which they were asked to identify and explain figures of speech in Cycles 1–5 and a summative questionnaire, including metaphor, simile, and imagery. This task was designed to directly assess their comprehension and ability to interpret poetic language after exposure to the music-integrated lessons. At baseline, responses to the initial questionnaire revealed that many learners were either unfamiliar with the terminology or unable to explain the effects of figurative language in poems; for example, more than half of the learners indicated through the baseline questionnaire (e.g. L1, Q3.4; L15, Q3.5) that they could recognise a metaphor but could not describe its function or effect. After the intervention, in Cycles 1–5, 58 learners completed their poetry analysis accurately, correctly identifying and explaining multiple figures of speech in the poems they analysed. This evidence demonstrates a measurable improvement in both comprehension and interpretive confidence, showing that learners were able to apply their understanding of figurative language in concrete written tasks rather than in abstract or general terms.

Learner reflections in the summative questionnaire emphasised the role of music as an interpretive scaffold. L17's written narrative explained, "When we listened to Firework, I could finally understand similes and metaphors because the words in the song made it clear. Poetry doesn't feel so scary anymore." This response demonstrates how familiar lyrical structures enabled learners to access abstract poetic concepts through culturally resonant texts. As Campbell (2018) argued, popular music mediates cognitive engagement by providing learners with accessible frameworks for interpreting metaphor, tone, and imagery.

Similarly, in the summative questionnaire, L6 explained, "The songs helped me hear alliteration and onomatopoeia. It was easier than just reading the poems." This highlights the multimodal affordances of music, where auditory engagement reinforces semantic understanding, supporting inclusive literacy practices through multiple entry points into meaning (Glaw et al., 2017).

In the summative questionnaire, L19 reflected, "Before, I would just memorise what a metaphor was. Now I see it in things I like, like songs I know." This shift from rote memorisation toward situated meaning-making illustrates the movement from procedural knowledge to interpretive agency (Fataar, 2025). In epistemic justice terms, learners are no longer positioned as outsiders to literary interpretation but as epistemic agents whose everyday cultural knowledge becomes integral to learning (Fataar, 2025).

L38 wrote that, "I never understood personification until I listened to the lyrics. It's like the objects in the song come alive, and I get the poem." Such reflections confirm Hargreaves et al.'s (2021) argument that music resonates with learners' sociocultural identities and enhances comprehension through affective and cognitive alignment.

When Shakespeare's (1609/n.d.) "Sonnet 18" was paired with Bruno Mars' (2010) "Just the Way You Are," 56 learners reported enhanced understanding of theme and structure. L50 wrote, "The song made me think about how I see my friends and family. Shakespeare's poem felt less old-fashioned because I could connect it to the song." This illustrates how popular music, content meaningful to learners, enabled learners to bridge temporal and cultural distance, legitimising their interpretive resources and disrupting the exclusivity often associated with canonical poetry (Heleta, 2016; Iwuanyamwu, 2023). L7's written narrative stated, "Comparing the poem to the song helped me understand the sonnet's rhythm and

meaning." Through these connections, learners engaged in inclusive literacy pedagogy that affirms cultural relevance as central rather than supplementary (Wang, 2025).

Emotional and Personal Engagement Through Music

In addition to cognitive scaffolding, music mediated learners' affective engagement with poetry, enabling deeper emotional connections to literary texts. Learners' responses indicate that music functioned as an affective bridge, allowing abstract poetic themes to become personally meaningful. While studying "Sonnet 18" alongside "Just the Way You Are," L25 wrote, "I felt the poem when I listened to the song. It made me think about people I care about."

This illustrates how music supported emotional literacy, enabling learners to anchor interpretation in lived experience. Such affective meaning-making aligns with social constructivist perspectives that view learning as mediated through cultural tools and personal interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). L27 wrote "I actually liked Shakespeare for the first time. The song made me feel the emotions behind the words." This response demonstrates how content relevant to learners' lives (music) can disrupt alienation from canonical texts by fostering emotional accessibility (Iwuanyamwu, 2023).

Further written reflections reinforced this personal resonance. L18's written response said, "It was like the poem was telling my story. It felt personal," and L5's written response indicated, "The lyrics helped me understand the tone of the poem. I could feel what Shakespeare meant." These responses confirm that affect is not separate from comprehension but integral to interpretive depth, supporting Campbell's (2018) claim that music enhances both cognitive and emotional engagement.

Similarly, pairing Walter de la Mare's (1913/n.d.) "Silver" with "Dancing in the Moonlight" generated imaginative and affective immersion, with 53 learners reporting awe and engagement. L21 wrote that, "The song made the moon feel magical, like the poem was alive," while L43's written response stated, "I could imagine the night sky while reading. The song helped me picture it." These reflections highlight the multimodal potential of music to create immersive literacy experiences, validating learners' cultural worlds and emotional responses as legitimate interpretive pathways (Iwuanyamwu, 2023).

Social Awareness and Youth Agency

The pairing of Johennesse's (n.d.) "a young man's thoughts before june 16th" with fun.'s (2011) "We Are Young" fostered learners' critical engagement with social issues and youth agency by creating a dialogic contrast between historical struggle and contemporary youth identity. While the poem foregrounds apartheid-era oppression and the urgency of youth resistance, the song reflects a contemporary youth voice associated with freedom, celebration, vulnerability, and belonging. This juxtaposition enabled learners to reflect critically on how youth agency is expressed differently "then" and "now." This pairing aligns with Iwuanyamwu's (2023) argument that meaningful content, such as contemporary songs, can bridge historical and cultural gaps, allowing learners to contextualise poetry within their lived realities. It also reflects decolonial imperatives to disrupt inherited hierarchies that privilege Eurocentric literary authority over learners' cultural repertoires (Heleta, 2016; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Learners' reflections demonstrate heightened social consciousness. L10's written narrative stated, "The song and poem made me think about what we can do as young people." L22 wrote, "I realised youth have always had a voice. The song showed it today too." These responses position learners as active participants in meaning-making and exemplify epistemic justice through the recognition of learner voice and interpretive legitimacy (Fataar, 2025).

Additional comments further illustrate this critical literacy shift. L8 indicated, "The protest in the poem made more sense after the song. It's about us now too," and L14's written response said, "I felt like I could be part of change. Reading the poem felt engaging, not boring." Such reflections confirm that music can transform poetry classrooms into spaces of social awareness and empowerment, consistent with the transformative aims of inclusive pedagogy (Wang, 2025).

Music Facilitating Reflective and Expressive Literacy

The intervention also strengthened learners' expressive literacy and reflective capacities. Narrative essays, reflective paragraphs, and personal poetry writing from the classroom activities revealed that music supported learners in articulating interpretations with greater confidence. Fifty-seven learners reported increased confidence in expressing their ideas following the intervention. L13 wrote, "Writing my own poem after listening to "Girl on Fire" helped me see that my ideas matter. I don't just read poetry. I can make it my own." This response reflects a shift from consumption of literary meaning toward production, reinforcing learner agency and epistemic participation (Fataar, 2025). L9 wrote, "The songs inspired my writing of poetry. I wrote about my feelings for the first time." Additional written narratives included, "I didn't know I could write like this. The music made me feel brave" (L23) and "I connected my life to the poems and songs, and it felt like my life story became valid" (L29). These responses illustrate how popular music functions as a culturally situated tool that affirms learner identity, aligning with inclusive literacy pedagogy that foregrounds voice, participation, and epistemic recognition (Wang, 2025).

Learners also highlighted interpretive freedom. For example, L46's written narrative indicated that, "I liked that I could express myself freely after listening to the songs and no one told me it was wrong." Such a response underscores how music disrupted hierarchical norms of correctness in poetry interpretation, promoting epistemic pluralism and socially just classroom practice.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that integrating popular music into Grade 10 English Home Language poetry instruction holds significant pedagogical and social value, particularly within the South African context, where literary teaching has historically been shaped by exclusionary knowledge hierarchies, rather than functioning merely as an engagement strategy, popular music operated as a transformative interpretive resource through which learners accessed, negotiated, and co-constructed poetic meaning. Importantly, the findings demonstrate that music functioned not only as an engagement strategy but also as an interpretive bridge that enabled learners to access canonical poetry through familiar cultural frameworks. The intervention, therefore, provides empirical support for the argument that culturally relevant pedagogies can advance epistemic justice, inclusive literacy practices, and decolonial transformation in secondary classrooms (Fataar, 2025; Heleta, 2016).

A central contribution of the study lies in how music disrupted the traditional positioning of poetry as inaccessible, elitist, or irrelevant. Baseline questionnaire responses indicated that many learners initially experienced poetry as difficult to understand or boring, reflecting broader patterns in South African schooling where canonical literature is often taught through teacher-centred approaches that privilege Eurocentric norms of interpretation (Heleta, 2016). Such pedagogies frequently marginalise learners' cultural repertoires and limit their participation as meaning-makers (Omodan, 2023). The marked improvement in learners' identification of figures of speech following the intervention suggests that popular music served as a powerful cognitive scaffold, enabling learners to engage with literary concepts through familiar and culturally resonant texts.

This cognitive scaffolding aligns strongly with Campbell's (2018) assertion that popular music mediates learners' engagement with abstract literary devices by providing accessible structures for interpretation. Learners' reflections illustrate that metaphor, alliteration, personification, and tone became more comprehensible when encountered first through song lyrics. Hargreaves et al. (2021) similarly emphasised that music resonates with learners' sociocultural identities, allowing complex concepts to be understood through frameworks already embedded in learners' lived experiences. In this way, music did not dilute the academic rigour of poetry instruction, rather, it enhanced learners' capacity to access canonical forms of literacy by building on interpretive resources that learners already possessed.

These outcomes extend beyond comprehension gains to questions of epistemic justice. Fataar (2025) argued that epistemic injustice occurs when learners' voices and cultural knowledges are systematically undervalued in educational spaces. Traditional poetry pedagogy often reinforces such injustice by

positioning learners as outsiders to legitimate literary interpretation, particularly when the curriculum privileges texts disconnected from learners' everyday cultural worlds. The integration of popular music challenged this dynamic by recognising learners' musical knowledge as epistemically valid. When learners wrote that they could "see" metaphors in "songs I know," they were asserting interpretive authority grounded in their own cultural experience. This reflects a shift from learners as passive recipients of authorised meanings to learners as epistemic agents actively participating in meaning-making.

This shift is also deeply aligned with inclusive literacy pedagogy. Wang (2025) emphasised that inclusive approaches require teaching practices that validate learners' identities, experiences, and cultural resources as central to literacy development. Wang further highlighted that authentic engagement occurs when learners' social repertoires are integrated into classroom knowledge construction. In this study, popular music functioned as such a repertoire, enabling learners to enter poetry interpretation through multimodal and culturally meaningful pathways. The multimodal dimension is particularly significant because learners engaged not only through reading but through listening, feeling, imagining, and relating. As Glaw et al. (2017) argued, multimodal engagement expands opportunities for learners to demonstrate understanding, particularly in diverse classrooms where linguistic and cultural differences shape access to meaning.

The findings from documentary research further suggest that popular music facilitated affective engagement as an essential component of comprehension. Learners repeatedly described how music enabled them to "feel" (e.g. L5, L9, L18, L21, L23, L27) poems, connect emotionally to tone, and interpret themes through personal relationships and imagination. These affective responses challenge the false separation between emotion and cognition in literary study. Instead, music enabled learners to experience poetry as personally resonant rather than abstract or alienating. Campbell's (2018) work supports this, noting that music enhances not only cognitive processing but also emotional connection, which in turn deepens interpretive understanding. When L50 wrote that Shakespeare "felt less old-fashioned," they were demonstrating how music can bridge temporal and cultural distance, making canonical poetry accessible without reducing its complexity.

This bridging function is consistent with Iwuanyamwu's (2023) argument that pairing contemporary cultural texts with canonical works allows learners to negotiate historical, cultural, and linguistic gaps. In the South African context, where poetry curricula often remain dominated by inherited colonial literary traditions, such bridging becomes a decolonial pedagogical act. Heleta (2016) critiqued the continued privileging of Eurocentric texts in ways that marginalise learners' cultural knowledge and reinforce structural inequalities. By integrating popular music, texts that learners already enjoy, as indicated in the baseline questionnaires, the intervention disrupted the exclusive authority of canonical interpretation and opened space for epistemic pluralism.

The decolonial significance of the intervention is further supported by Mignolo and Walsh (2018), Iwuanyamwu (2023), and Omodan (2023), who argued that decolonial education requires dismantling Western-dominated epistemologies and creating dialogical spaces where marginalised knowledges are not tokenistic but central. In this study, popular music was not added as entertainment or supplementary material, rather, it operated as a legitimate interpretive framework through which learners engaged poetry critically and socially. This repositioning reflects decolonial aims of challenging hierarchical distinctions between institutional literary traditions and everyday cultural knowledge.

The findings also highlight music's role in fostering critical literacy, social awareness, and youth agency. The pairing of Johennesse's (n.d.) poem with "We Are Young" created a dialogic contrast between apartheid-era youth resistance and contemporary youth identity. Learners' reflections indicate that this juxtaposition enabled them to recognise both continuity and transformation in youth agency across historical moments. Such outcomes demonstrate that poetry pedagogy, when culturally mediated, can become a site of social consciousness rather than mere textual analysis. L14's written statements about being "part of change" suggests that the classroom became a participatory space where historical texts were connected to present realities. This aligns with the transformative orientation of educational research as social change, where learners are empowered to engage critically with society through literacy practices.

From a social constructivist perspective, these outcomes are unsurprising. Vygotsky (1978) emphasised that learning occurs through socially mediated interaction and the use of cultural tools. Popular music, in this study, functioned as such a tool, enabling learners to collaboratively interpret poetry through dialogue, shared cultural reference points, and collective meaning-making. The classroom shifted from a site of transmission to a site of negotiation, where learners' interpretations were valued and knowledge was co-constructed.

Finally, the intervention's impact on reflective and expressive literacy further demonstrates its transformative potential. Learners' increased confidence in writing their own poems and expressing interpretations suggests that music not only supported comprehension but also fostered voice and agency in literary production. When L13 wrote that their "ideas matter" and that they "didn't know [they] could write like this" (L29), they were enacting epistemic justice through authorship and self-expression. Such outcomes reinforce the argument that inclusive pedagogy must extend beyond access to interpretation toward enabling learners to contribute their own meanings, narratives, and identities within literary spaces (Fataar, 2025; Lim, 2024; Wang, 2025).

Findings confirm that popular music can function as a culturally situated pedagogical resource that advances epistemic justice, inclusive literacy, and decolonial transformation in South African poetry classrooms. By validating learners' cultural knowledge, fostering emotional resonance, enabling critical engagement with social issues, and amplifying learner voice, music-infused poetry pedagogy disrupts inherited hierarchies of textual authority and creates more equitable access to literary meaning-making. Such an approach aligns with the broader aims of educational research for social change, demonstrating how classroom-based participatory interventions can contribute to socially just and transformative literacy education.

Conclusion and Implications for Teaching

This study demonstrates that integrating popular music into poetry instruction offers a means of advancing epistemic justice and inclusive literacy in South African Grade 10 classrooms. By pairing culturally relevant songs with canonical and locally authored poems, learners were able to connect their lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and emotional sensibilities to literary analysis. The findings show that popular music facilitated comprehension of poetic devices and themes and enhanced affective engagement, critical reflection, and expressive literacy. Learners reported that music provided scaffolding for understanding abstract literary concepts, legitimised their interpretations, and encouraged active co-construction of meaning. In particular, the juxtaposition of historical texts, such as Fhazel Johennesse's (n.d.) "a young man's thoughts before june 16th" with contemporary songs like fun.'s (2011) "We Are Young," fostered reflection on social change, youth agency, and the ongoing relevance of historical struggles, illustrating the potential of music to bridge temporal, cultural, and social gaps in the literature classroom.

The pedagogical implications of this study are significant. First, teachers are encouraged to incorporate culturally meaningful multimodal resources, such as popular music, to validate learners' epistemic contributions and disrupt hierarchical, exclusionary literary norms. Second, linking contemporary cultural texts with canonical poetry can enhance comprehension while promoting critical literacy, enabling learners to interrogate social issues, historical contexts, and personal experiences. Third, action research-informed cycles of teaching and reflection allow teachers to adapt instruction responsively, fostering dialogic and socially just learning environments.

Ultimately, this study highlights the transformative potential of culturally responsive pedagogy. These findings suggest that integrating culturally familiar multimodal texts can play an important role in creating more equitable and participatory literature classrooms. By foregrounding learners' voices, knowledge, and lived realities, teachers can create inclusive literature classrooms that advance social and educational equity, support critical engagement, and contribute to the broader decolonisation of the curriculum. Popular music, in this regard, is not merely a motivational tool but a vehicle for epistemic justice and socially transformative learning.

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Improving Attention and Engagement in Special Needs Education Through Visual Prototypes[3]

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Abstract

Students with intellectual disabilities face persistent challenges in conventional educational systems due to difficulties in abstract reasoning, verbal comprehension, and motor coordination. While inclusive education has gained global momentum, there remains a critical gap in the availability of adaptive, engaging, and accessible instructional media tailored to this learner group. This study aims to address that gap by designing and evaluating a prototype of visual learning media rooted in interactive communication and cognitive design principles. Conducted at SLB Amal Mulia, a special education institution in South Jakarta, the research employs a qualitative, participatory approach informed by asset-based community development. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and visual activity documentation involving 30 students with mild intellectual disabilities. The prototype incorporated three interactive models: spot-dot drawing, object matching, and multi-sensory visual media. Results revealed significant improvements in student attention span, emotional engagement, and visual task completion. Students demonstrated increased motivation, social interaction, and verbal expression, particularly in response to high-contrast visuals and interactive stimuli. The study concludes that visual learning when grounded in user-responsive design and implemented with educator facilitation can meaningfully enhance learning experiences in inclusive settings. Its key contribution lies in merging pedagogical theory with visual communication practice to create replicable learning tools for inclusive classrooms. These insights contribute to the fields of special education, inclusive design, and multimodal learning, aligning with the journal's scope on education innovation and accessibility

Key words: visual learning, intellectual disabilities, inclusive education, visual communication, special needs education

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Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a central tenet of modern educational systems that aim to promote equity and accessibility for all learners. The fundamental principle of inclusive education lies in providing learning opportunities that do not discriminate on the basis of physical, cognitive, emotional, or social differences (UNESCO, 2020). Among the groups most in need of adaptive and humanistic learning approaches are students with intellectual disabilities, or those classified as having mild intellectual impairments (Gajre et al., 2015; Puspitaloka et al., 2022). These students frequently encounter difficulties in processing abstract concepts, understanding spatial relations, and retaining verbal instructions. Consequently, visual-based learning has emerged as one of the most effective pedagogical methods for supporting their learning needs.

In the Indonesian context, recent data suggest that more than 6.6 million individuals live with intellectual disabilities, posing a significant challenge for the educational sector to implement not only accommodative but also innovative, technology-driven learning strategies (Antara News, 2020). Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB) Amal Mulia [Special School Amal Mulia], a specialised educational institution located in South Jakarta, has demonstrated an active commitment to supporting students with cognitive limitations. While the school has adopted Indonesia's national Merdeka Curriculum and initiated teacher development through digital platforms (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2023), real-world classroom challenges persist. These include the lack of accessible learning media, insufficient interactive visual materials, and a digital divide that limits the integration of inclusive educational technology.

Within the framework of special education, the use of visualisation in learning plays a critical role. Visual components such as images, colours, forms, and symbols function not only as teaching aids but also as alternative communicative tools that are more accessible to students with cognitive impairments (Donovan et al., 2022). Visual perception is closely linked to key cognitive processes such as attention, pattern recognition, and decision-making (Galderisi et al., 2015; Pieters et al., 2012). Given the limited attention span and reduced short-term memory capacity often observed in children with intellectual disabilities, visual learning strategies that activate multiple sensory inputs, particularly vision, are essential to improving learning outcomes (Nazirzadeh et al., 2017).

This study is part of a longitudinal research effort that began in 2021 at SLB Amal Mulia South Jakarta, with earlier investigations mapping the visual perception patterns of students as they engaged in basic drawing tasks. The results of the initial phase revealed that students struggled to depict objects without clear visual guidance (Ruslan et al., 2021). Building upon those findings, this study utilises an asset-based community development approach combined with visual prototyping to design learning media that are contextual, participatory, and accessible to students classified as having mild intellectual disabilities (Qiaoyu et al., 2024; Ruth et al., 2023). This approach emphasises not only the creation of usable teaching tools, but also the exploration of students' cognitive and affective responses to visual stimuli.

The impetus for this research stems from the need to develop learning media that are not merely passive but interactive and engaging. Various studies have shown that students with special needs respond more effectively to interactive media compared to traditional instructional methods (Laila & Damri, 2023). At SLB Amal Mulia, visual activities such as spot-dot drawing, object-matching, and interactive visual games that involve the recognition of shapes and colours have demonstrated promising results. Experimental sessions revealed increased student enthusiasm, active participation, and enhanced visual recognition when these techniques were used (Puspitaloka et al., 2022).

Moreover, visual learning strategies have been shown to yield benefits beyond cognitive outcomes. Many students with intellectual disabilities have limited verbal expression abilities, making visual modes of communication an essential alternative for expressing understanding, emotion, and intent. Interviews with teachers and parents affirmed that visual learning not only reduced learning-related stress but also

improved student motivation and facilitated greater social interaction (Author interview, 2024). Teachers emphasised the importance of simplicity, colour contrast, and uncluttered layout in supporting students' comprehension of visual materials.

The novelty of this research lies in the development of a visual learning system based on active interaction and communication design principles. While previous studies have focused on improving addition skills in natural numbers using bead-based learning media (Nurdesiana et al., 2024), or gesture-based technology for life skills training (Nazirzadeh et al., 2017), this study incorporates pedagogical insights with visual communication design to build a flexible visual learning prototype. Elements such as colour choice, object spacing, dot size, and visual placement were all tailored to align with the perceptual capacities of students with intellectual disabilities (Donovan et al., 2022; Wisnu et al., 2021).

A key recommendation emerging from this research is the need for interdisciplinary collaboration. The development of inclusive educational applications requires joint efforts among visual communication designers, educators, and educational psychologists. Teachers bring essential contextual knowledge of their students, while designers contribute expertise in crafting visually functional and communicative interfaces. Together, this collaboration can yield educational media that are not only aesthetically appealing but also pedagogically effective (Moller & Kettley, 2017).

Furthermore, this research underscores the importance of institutional and policy-level support for inclusive learning media. Government bodies, higher education institutions, and the creative industry must collectively invest in developing comprehensive inclusive education ecosystems. With appropriate incentives and cross-sector collaboration, education for students with intellectual disabilities can shift from being perceived as a burden to being recognised as a space for innovation and creative development (Aisha & Mulyana, 2019; UNESCO, 2020).

In sum, this study responds to the urgent need for visual learning media that are tested, context-sensitive, and aligned with the characteristics of students with intellectual disabilities. By focusing on observable responses ranging from simple to more complex behaviours, this research aims to offer practical solutions for educators working in inclusive learning environments. The visual learning prototype and accompanying experimental sessions developed at SLB Amal Mulia are expected to contribute meaningfully not only to academic scholarship but also to practical strategies for inclusive educational practices in Indonesia and beyond.

Literature Review

Visual Learning for Children with Intellectual Disabilities

Visual learning has emerged as a transformative strategy in the education of students with intellectual disabilities, particularly because it leverages visual perception to bypass verbal limitations. Research has consistently emphasised that visual cues enhance information retention and comprehension among learners with cognitive challenges (Westwood, 2020). Unlike text-heavy or auditory-based instruction, visual-based methods provide concrete representations that foster concept formation, especially among students who struggle with abstract reasoning (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023).

Children with intellectual disabilities often experience delays in language acquisition and symbolic processing, making alternative channels of learning essential. Studies by Hammond et al. (2010) have shown that the use of visual schedules and picture-based instruction significantly improves task completion and behavioural regulation. Similarly, Alnahdi et al. (2024) observed that integrating visual content into daily learning increased students' engagement and autonomy in classroom routines. A growing body of evidence also points to the neurodevelopmental basis for visual preference in children with intellectual impairments. According to Liss et al. (2006), students with developmental disabilities display heightened responsiveness to stimuli that offer colour contrast, spatial clarity, and motion,

indicating the effectiveness of visuals as cognitive anchors. Additionally, research by Liang et al. (2024) demonstrated that learners exposed to picture exchange systems and interactive graphics made notable progress in vocabulary acquisition and expressive communication.

In inclusive classrooms, visual learning tools also serve to bridge attention gaps and reduce anxiety levels among students with intellectual disabilities. Visual timers, illustrated checklists, and pictorial social stories help students anticipate transitions and understand expectations, as shown in the study by Knight et al. (2015). These strategies promote both emotional security and instructional clarity. From a technological perspective, advancements in digital visual learning such as interactive whiteboards, touchscreen tablets, and animated learning apps have opened new possibilities for adapting content delivery (Alzrayer & Banda, 2017). These platforms enable multimodal input and feedback, essential for reinforcing learning in students who benefit from repeated, visually guided instruction.

While visual learning has shown robust benefits across cognitive and behavioural domains, its impact is significantly influenced by the intentional design of materials. According to Wong and Wong (2019), visuals that are cluttered, overly abstract, or low in contrast tend to confuse rather than aid learners. Therefore, structured visual design principles must be applied to optimise the effectiveness of visual learning for children with intellectual disabilities.

Visual Teaching Concepts for Children with Intellectual Disabilities

The pedagogical design of visual instruction for children with intellectual disabilities must align with both developmental psychology and principles of inclusive education. Effective visual teaching extends beyond the mere use of images; it involves structuring the learning experience around the learner's perceptual and cognitive profile (Hallahan et al., 2020). For these students, visuals are not supplementary but rather, primary modalities of comprehension and expression. One of the most widely researched models is the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), which enables nonverbal or minimally verbal students to initiate requests and communicate preferences. Frost (2003) found that PECS fosters autonomy and reduces behavioural outbursts caused by communication frustration. In similar pedagogical efforts, visual scaffolding techniques such as step-by-step picture sequences aid in task independence and memory retention (Dettmer et al., 2000).

Designing visual instruction for this population also requires consideration of cognitive load. Mayer's (2009) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning emphasised that visuals must be intentionally paired with minimal text and logical sequencing to prevent overload. For children with intellectual disabilities, this principle is even more critical because working memory capacity is typically reduced (Swanson & Siegel, 2001). Moreover, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework supports the idea that curriculum materials must offer multiple means of representation and expression, including visual formats (CAST, 2018). UDL-informed approaches have been applied in special education to adapt lessons through image-based storytelling, visual timetables, and symbolic representations that resonate with diverse learners.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is another core element in developing visual teaching tools. As identified by Guedes et al. (2024), the co-design of learning media involving educators, psychologists, and visual designers results in tools that are not only aesthetically engaging but also developmentally appropriate. This ensures that visual elements are purposeful and aligned with pedagogical objectives. Importantly, cultural and contextual relevance must be considered when creating visual materials. According to Alquraini and Gut (2012), visual symbols must reflect the students' lived experiences to avoid misinterpretation or detachment. In Southeast Asian contexts, this means that local imagery, familiar objects, and culturally appropriate narratives should be embedded into teaching visuals. Finally, teacher facilitation plays a decisive role in mediating visual learning experiences. Visual tools are only effective when educators know how to integrate them with instructional strategies, provide interpretive support,

and observe student responses (Foster-Cohen & Mirfin-Veitch, 2017). Professional development focused on visual pedagogy, therefore, is a crucial investment in inclusive education.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach with exploratory and participatory characteristics, aiming to deeply understand how visual-based instructional methods can support learning processes for students with mild intellectual disabilities, categorised as C-level in Indonesia's educational classification system. The research was grounded in an asset-based community development framework, which emphasises the identification and mobilisation of local strengths within inclusive school communities (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). This approach was selected due to its ability to harness the existing capacities of schools, particularly the experience of educators, involvement of parents, and the specific needs of students as the foundation for developing responsive and contextualised visual learning prototypes.

The research site was SLB Amal Mulia, a special needs school located in South Jakarta that serves students with intellectual disabilities from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The school is recognised for its flexible curriculum structures and openness to innovations involving visual and digital learning. This setting enabled the researchers to design and test visual learning strategies that reflect the authentic classroom dynamics and lived experiences of both students and teachers.

Participants in the study included students diagnosed with mild intellectual disabilities, ranging from first to sixth grade. The sampling strategy employed was purposive sampling, which involved selecting individuals deemed capable of providing rich and relevant data to the study objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). Inclusion criteria required participants to have the ability to respond to visual and interactive instructions. Students with dual impairments or severe communication challenges were excluded to ensure the interventions were appropriately targeted. A total of 30 students were selected, representing a cross-section of grade levels. This sample size was considered sufficient for qualitative analysis focused on thematic patterns across the three visual learning models implemented.

The central intervention in this research was the design and implementation of a visual learning prototype, informed by preliminary classroom observations and input from teachers. The prototype consisted of three core instructional activities: spot-dot drawing (connecting dots to form shapes or letters), visual object matching (identifying and pairing images based on form or colour), and interactive media engagement involving projected visuals accompanied by audio cues and soft background music. Each model was designed to activate students' visual memory, shape recognition, and attention focus, consistent with theories of visual information processing for students with special educational needs (Lerner & Johns, 2012).

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-phase framework. Phase 1 involved familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and observational notes. Phase 2 consisted of initial coding, where segments of student behaviours, teacher comments, and classroom interactions were labelled descriptively. In Phase 3, codes were grouped into candidate themes based on conceptual similarity (e.g. sustained attention, visual discrimination difficulty, emotional responsiveness). Phase 4 involved reviewing themes against raw data to ensure internal coherence. In Phase 5, themes were refined and defined, and finally in Phase 6, analytical narratives were constructed to connect themes with theoretical frameworks of visual cognition and inclusive pedagogy.

Identification and Validation of Core Instructional Models

The primary objective of this workshop was threefold. First, participants revisited findings from the 2021 baseline study (Ruslan et al., 2021), which documented recurring difficulties among students in

interpreting abstract visual tasks without structured guidance. Second, teachers were invited to articulate current classroom challenges, particularly those related to attention span, task persistence, visual comparison ability, and response to verbal instructions. Third, the group collectively mapped existing classroom assets, including available digital infrastructure, teacher competencies, and student perceptual tendencies, in alignment with the asset-based community development framework guiding this research.

Through guided discussion, prototype sketching, and simulated classroom walkthroughs, several visual activity concepts were proposed and evaluated. Each proposed model was assessed using three validation criteria: (1) alignment with students demonstrated perceptual strengths particularly their responsiveness to high contrast visuals, structured sequencing, and repetitive patterns; (2) feasibility within the school's existing technological and material resources; and (3) teacher readiness and confidence in facilitating the activity with appropriate scaffolding.

As a result of this iterative selection process, three core instructional models were formally agreed upon: spot-dot drawing, visual object matching, and interactive projected visuals. These models were chosen because they represented progressively layered visual engagement—from structured motor-guided sequencing to comparative visual analysis and finally, to multi-sensory interactive stimulation. The validation process ensured that the selected models were not externally imposed interventions, but context-sensitive instructional strategies co-developed with practitioners, thereby strengthening ecological validity and practical sustainability within the school environment.

Roles of Researchers and Teachers

This study adopted a participatory collaborative model in which teachers functioned not merely as implementers of a pre-designed intervention but as active co-facilitators and contextual contributors throughout the research process. The collaboration was structured to ensure that the visual learning prototype reflected both theoretical design principles and the lived realities of classroom practice. The research team was primarily responsible for the conceptual development of the visual prototype, including the design of visual layouts, determination of colour contrast schemes, sequencing structures, and the preparation of research instruments such as observation sheets and interview guides. Researchers also coordinated the overall research design, ethical procedures, and documentation protocols.

Teachers, on the other hand, played a critical mediating role in contextual adaptation and classroom execution. They provided insight into student behavioural patterns, attention span limitations, and individual learning profiles, which informed adjustments to task complexity and instructional pacing. During implementation, teachers delivered verbal instructions, modelled task procedures, and provided scaffolding support such as repetition, simplified language, and hand-over-hand assistance when necessary.

Researchers conducted structured observations during each session, focusing on student engagement, visual response patterns, and emotional expression. Data collection was therefore distributed yet coordinated. Following each intervention session, reflective meetings were held between researchers and teachers to discuss observations, clarify interpretations, and identify emerging patterns. This joint analytical process ensured that findings were not interpreted solely from a design perspective but were grounded in pedagogical experience, thereby strengthening the study's credibility, reflexivity, and ecological validity.

Results

This research aimed to explore the effectiveness of a visual learning prototype comprising three interactive models: spot-dot drawing, visual object matching, and interactive visual media in enhancing engagement, shape recognition, attentional focus, and emotional responsiveness among students with mild intellectual

disabilities at SLB Amal Mulia, South Jakarta. The results are presented thematically according to the original sub-sections of the study, supported by direct observations, teacher interviews, student responses, and documentation of classroom activities.

Enhancement of Visual Responsiveness

Over the course of a structured 3-day experimental learning process, a majority of the students demonstrated heightened levels of interest, active participation, and sustained engagement with the visual learning schemes implemented. The transition from conventional learning methods that often relied heavily on verbal instruction and written exercises to a visual-based, interactive approach led to significant improvements in attention span, emotional expression, and task orientation. This effect was especially notable in students who previously displayed short attention spans or passive classroom behaviour.

Based on participatory observations, approximately 85 per cent of the 30 students involved in the trial successfully completed at least one visual learning activity without disengaging or leaving the designated learning area. The presence of high-contrast visuals, combined with motion and supportive sound elements, played a critical role in capturing student attention and maintaining cognitive engagement throughout the sessions. A first-grade teacher explained, "The children were more focused when images were shown. Normally, they lose interest quickly, but this time, they stayed until the end."

Data also revealed that students were more responsive to projected visual stimuli compared to static media such as printed worksheets or chalkboard drawings. The use of a digital projector to display large, colourful images facilitated group focus and reduced distractions. Teachers noted that even students with minimal verbal communication skills used gestures such as pointing, nodding, and facial expressions to convey understanding, which underscores the communicative power of visual learning in bridging verbal limitations.

In addition to cognitive engagement, emotional responsiveness was also markedly improved. Students frequently smiled, laughed, clapped their hands, or expressed excitement when they recognised familiar objects or completed visual tasks. Some students asked to repeat activities, indicating intrinsic motivation and enjoyment, which are crucial components of affective learning domains in inclusive education.

Effectiveness of Spot-Dot Drawing Scheme

The first visual learning strategy employed in this research was spot-dot drawing, in which students were asked to connect a sequence of prearranged dots to form letters or geometric shapes. This model was divided into three levels of complexity: Level 1 (11–15 dots), Level 2 (16–23 dots), and Level 3 (more than 23 dots). Each level presented distinct challenges depending on the cognitive maturity and motor coordination of the student.

Students from Grades 1 to 3 generally completed Level 1 forms with moderate assistance from teachers. These basic shapes, such as boxes and the letter C, were comprehended relatively quickly. However, as the complexity increased in Levels 2 and 3 involving hexagonals, stars, and circles, the majority of younger students showed signs of confusion, hesitation, or withdrawal. Observers noted instances where students abandoned tasks or verbally expressed confusion. A teacher explained, "When the shapes are too complex, the students tend to give up. We often had to guide their hands."

Image 1

Children Participating in Visual Learning Activities Using Spot-Dot Drawing Prototype

(Source: Field Documentation, SLB Amal Mulia, South Jakarta, 2024)

In contrast, fourth-grade students demonstrated greater autonomy and accuracy. Most were able to complete Level 1 and Level 2 tasks without significant teacher intervention and engaged with Level 3 tasks with determination and minimal correction. Notably, several students voiced their desire to repeat tasks, suggesting a positive psychological effect and growing confidence. One student proudly declared, "I can draw a circle now!" These reactions demonstrate that dot-to-dot visual guidance supports both the development of fine motor skills and the enhancement of spatial cognition.

The structured nature of the spot-dot model, with numbered guides and progressive difficulty, offered a clear and attainable path for students. Teachers found it particularly useful as a diagnostic tool to assess individual visual motor coordination and as a means to promote task persistence. Additionally, the simplicity of the materials allowed for ease of replication and scalability in daily classroom practice.

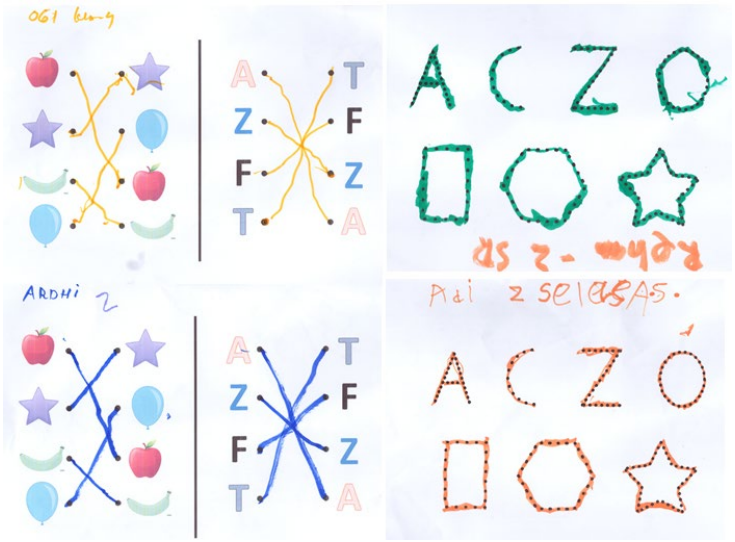
Visual Object Matching Scheme.

The second visual learning model, object matching, focused on enhancing visual distinction ability, pattern recognition, and associative logic. Students were presented with tasks requiring them to match visual elements based on shape, colour, or symbolic identity. These included pairing geometric shapes, fruits, vehicles, and matching uppercase with lowercase letters. The tasks were presented in both printed and digital formats, allowing comparison of student responses across media.

Image 2

Visualisation of Student Attention Improvement Through Interactive Visual Prototypes

(Source: Field Experiment at SLB Amal Mulia, South Jakarta, 2024)



Lower-grade students (Grades 1 to 3) performed more accurately when the objects had stark colour contrasts, such as red and blue, or yellow and black. In these cases, approximately 65 per cent of students successfully completed matching tasks within two minutes. However, performance declined when students were asked to distinguish between objects with similar hues or non-standard forms. Teachers highlighted this challenge: "When the colours are close, like green and cyan, it confuses them. But red and blue are much easier." Fourth-grade students exhibited higher levels of accuracy across all task types, with success rates exceeding 85 per cent in most cases. The use of digital media featuring animated instructions and audio reinforcement led to higher engagement and faster completion rates. Students appeared to respond more quickly to visuals that were dynamic and supported by auditory cues, compared to static worksheets.

Social interaction was also observed during this activity. Several students helped their peers identify correct object pairs, suggesting that visual learning facilitated peer-to-peer communication and collaboration. Emotional reactions such as smiling, excitement, and verbal affirmations (e.g. "I found it!" or "That's the same!") were commonly recorded, indicating that visual matching is both cognitively stimulating and emotionally satisfying. Moreover, symbolic recognition—an essential foundation for literacy—was improved through this model. The use of visual symbols and consistent repetition helped reinforce student understanding of letterforms and simple semantic categories.

Interactive Visual Scheme

The third and final component of the prototype was the interactive visual scheme, which combined projected images, verbal cues, background music, and student physical responses. In this session, students were encouraged to identify familiar objects (e.g. fruits, animals, school supplies) and respond by naming them, pointing, or mimicking their associated movements. This multi-sensory activity was highly effective in engaging multiple cognitive pathways simultaneously. Approximately 78 per cent of students responded spontaneously to prompts, even those who were usually silent or hesitant in conventional learning settings. A notable observation came from a teacher who shared, "A usually quiet student shouted 'apple!'

when a red apple appeared on screen." This response illustrates how integrated audio-visual stimuli can trigger verbal output and cognitive recognition.

Students retained information well within the 15–20 minutes session span. During post-session evaluations, many students were able to recall three to five images and, in some cases, retell sequences of events or interactions from the session. The activity encouraged expressive behaviour, and some students shared their experiences with family members or teachers, further indicating the internalisation of learning.

Interactive visuals also supported classroom management. Teachers reported that students required fewer verbal instructions and were more willing to participate when the media prompted direct responses. Peer interaction was fostered organically, and the classroom environment became more vibrant, collaborative, and student-centred. Teachers expressed a strong desire to continue using such tools regularly.

Thematic Interpretation of Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-phase framework. Phase 1 involved familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and observational notes. Phase 2 consisted of initial coding, where segments of student behaviours, teacher comments, and classroom interactions were labelled descriptively. In Phase 3, codes were grouped into candidate themes based on conceptual similarity (e.g. sustained attention, visual discrimination difficulty, emotional responsiveness). Phase 4 involved reviewing themes against raw data to ensure internal coherence. In Phase 5, themes were refined and defined and finally, in Phase 6, analytical narratives were constructed to connect themes with theoretical frameworks of visual cognition and inclusive pedagogy. The analysis was conducted in two stages: first, within-case analysis for each instructional model; second, cross-model synthesis to identify overarching patterns across all interventions.

Summary and Contributions

The findings of this study collectively demonstrate that structured visual learning significantly enhances attentional engagement and cognitive responsiveness among students with mild intellectual disabilities. The three instructional models—spot-dot drawing, visual matching, and interactive projected media—each contributed uniquely to the development of fine motor coordination, symbolic recognition, and expressive communication. Importantly, the degree of effectiveness varied according to age and grade level, highlighting the necessity of differentiated visual scaffolding. Teacher facilitation emerged as a critical mediating factor, reinforcing that visual tools are most effective when accompanied by adaptive instructional guidance. Furthermore, the study confirms that simple, high-contrast, and uncluttered visual layouts are essential design principles for inclusive learning environments.

The scientific contribution of this study lies In Its validation of visual learning approaches as an effective strategy within inclusive education. These findings support existing literature on the effectiveness of multisensory learning and pave the way for further development of educational digital applications based on visual learning for children with special needs. Moreover, this research provides practical guidance for educators, instructional media developers, and educational policymakers. A curriculum design that promotes the use of adaptive visual media, along with teacher training in functional visual design, could serve as a concrete step toward strengthening educational inclusivity in Indonesia. Accordingly, the results of this study offer significant contributions to both academic discourse and educational practice. Visualisation is not merely a learning aid; it functions as a pedagogical bridge that opens up equitable learning opportunities for all students, including those with intellectual challenges.

Discussion

These findings extend existing scholarship on multisensory learning by demonstrating that visual structuring does not merely aid comprehension but actively reshapes classroom participation patterns. Unlike conventional teacher-centred instruction, visual prototyping redistributed communicative agency toward students, allowing nonverbal expression to become a legitimate mode of participation. This suggests that visual learning operates not only as a cognitive scaffold but also as a socio-emotional equaliser within inclusive classrooms.

The positive effects observed across all three learning schemes (spot-dot drawing, visual object matching, and interactive visual media) demonstrate the value of multimodal instruction in inclusive education. These findings support longstanding theories of multisensory learning, which emphasise the role of visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic inputs in reinforcing cognition among students with special educational needs (Lerner & Johns, 2012). In particular, the prototype aligns with the UDL framework, which advocates for multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement to accommodate diverse learner profiles. From a pedagogical standpoint, the spot-dot drawing activity proved especially effective in building fine motor coordination and visual sequencing. This supports the notion that visual structuring, when scaffolded in levels of difficulty, can aid cognitive development and task persistence. The success of the object-matching scheme illustrates how visual comparison tasks stimulate pattern recognition and logical reasoning critical foundations for early literacy and numeracy skills. The third scheme, involving interactive visual media, was particularly impactful in promoting spontaneous verbalisation and social interaction, reinforcing literature that highlights the importance of engaging sensory pathways to support language emergence in students with speech or developmental delays (Inayah & Prasetyo, 2025).

Moreover, this study emphasises the role of emotional affect in learning. Student responses such as smiling, laughter, clapping, and vocal excitement suggest that affective engagement is a critical indicator of learning readiness. These emotional cues reflect not only enjoyment but also a sense of accomplishment and growing confidence—factors that are vital to the learning motivation of students with intellectual challenges. One of the key strengths of this study lies in its methodological design. By combining an asset-based approach with participatory and exploratory qualitative methods, the research captured authentic responses within a naturalistic classroom setting. This ecological validity enhances the relevance and applicability of the findings for real-world educational practice. Furthermore, the research involved collaborative input from teachers, which enriched the design of the prototype and ensured its contextual appropriateness for students with varying cognitive and behavioural profiles.
Nonetheless, the study is not without limitations. Its scope was confined to a single urban special needs school, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other institutional settings, particularly rural or under-resourced environments. While the study provides strong qualitative evidence of visual learning effectiveness, it did not quantitatively measure long-term outcomes such as academic performance, memory retention over time, or socio-emotional development across semesters. In addition, individual differences among students, such as variations in cognitive delay severity, home support, and motivation, were not systematically analysed but may have influenced outcomes.

The implications of this study are multifaceted. For educational practitioners, the findings highlight the necessity of integrating visual strategies into everyday teaching for students with intellectual disabilities. Training programmes should be developed to enhance teacher competence in designing and implementing visual media that are pedagogically sound and accessible. At the institutional level, school leadership should allocate resources for the acquisition of digital tools, projectors, and learning software that facilitate interactive visual learning.

From a policy perspective, this research advocates for the inclusion of visual-based methodologies in national curricula and instructional guidelines for special education. Government bodies and academic

institutions should consider fostering cross-sector partnerships involving educators, designers, and technologists to co-create scalable visual learning solutions tailored to local educational needs. Such collaborative efforts can contribute to building an inclusive learning ecosystem grounded in evidence-based design. Future research could expand upon the current findings by incorporating longitudinal studies that assess the sustained impact of visual learning interventions. Quantitative metrics, such as pre- and post-tests in shape recognition, vocabulary acquisition, and attention span, could provide empirical support to complement the rich qualitative insights gathered here. Additionally, exploring the application of these visual learning models in different cultural and linguistic contexts would provide a broader understanding of their adaptability and impact.

Conclusions

This research set out to examine the role of visual learning as an effective pedagogical tool for students with intellectual disabilities in inclusive education contexts. Through a carefully designed prototype featuring three distinct learning models—spot-dot drawing, object matching, and interactive visual media—the study was able to demonstrate significant improvements in cognitive engagement, attentional focus, and social-emotional participation among students at SLB Amal Mulia in South Jakarta.

The results consistently showed that visual learning provided a stimulating, accessible, and emotionally supportive framework for students who traditionally struggle with abstract verbal instruction. The incorporation of visual structure, colour contrast, movement, and audio stimuli proved to be not only engaging but instrumental in enhancing memory, comprehension, and task persistence. Moreover, the presence of responsive and adaptive teacher facilitation further amplified the effectiveness of the interventions, enabling personalised support tailored to individual student needs.

Each component of the visual learning model addressed a specific area of developmental learning. Spot-dot drawing helped improve fine motor coordination and visual sequencing, object matching fostered logical reasoning and early literacy recognition, while interactive media sessions activated multi-sensory learning pathways and stimulated expressive language. Together, these strategies presented a cohesive, multisensory instructional design that aligned with UDL principles and emphasised inclusivity as an operational standard rather than an aspirational goal.

Additionally, the effective benefits of visual learning such as increased motivation, enthusiasm, and self-confidence provided a crucial foundation for sustainable academic growth. Observations of spontaneous verbalisation, emotional expression, and peer collaboration suggest that the visual learning environment not only enhanced academic engagement but also nurtured a sense of belonging and self-efficacy among students with cognitive challenges.

Importantly, this research also highlighted the critical need for collaboration among educational practitioners, designers, researchers, and policy-makers. Visual communication design, when applied with contextual sensitivity and pedagogical alignment, offers powerful solutions for expanding access to learning and bridging persistent gaps in inclusive education. The active involvement of teachers and the support of institutional leadership were central to the successful implementation of the prototype.

In conclusion, this study affirms that interactive visual learning, when developed through asset-based and participatory methods, can play a transformative role in inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities. It not only supports their academic development but also enhances social interaction and emotional well-being. The findings offer a replicable and scalable model for educators seeking to cultivate adaptive, joyful, and equitable learning environments. As inclusive education continues to evolve, the insights from this study serve as both a practical guide and a conceptual framework for integrating visual design innovation into pedagogical practice.

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Beyond Gender: Insights from Grade 2 Chinese Learners About Bravery and Strength Through Drawings[4]

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Abstract

By employing participatory visual methodologies in the form of drawings, this study sought to explore Grade 2 Chinese learners' insights into the notions of strength and bravery as represented in traditional and diverse children's literature. The study demonstrated the premise that notions related to bravery and strength are socially constructed, and that traditional literature has firm gendered connotations related to these notions, often favouring male characters. For 16 weeks, learners at a bilingual school in Beijing, China gathered for a reading club where they engaged with traditional and diverse children's literature. In response, participants were invited to create drawings, accompanied by written and verbal feedback of book characters they thought were brave and strong. The results showed that after engagement with more diverse literature, the participants had more flexible and nuanced conceptualisations of bravery and strength that extended beyond gender and that were not confined to physical attributes. Rather, participants associated these attributes with resilience, perseverance, helpfulness, and moral courage. The study highlighted both the importance of diverse literature as a way of promoting social change and disrupting rigid gender norms, as well as the usefulness of drawings as a way of capturing nuanced insights, especially in a foreign language context.

Keywords: bravery, strength, gender representations, diverse literature, drawings, meaning-making

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Introduction

The contexts in which we live and learn are inherently shaped by, and mediated through, socially constructed, dominant, and contested notions related to gender (Adhikari & Sigdel, 2024; Enloe, 2016). This encompasses, though it is not limited to the way that we drive, the way that we speak, what we wear, and sometimes quite dangerously, even infiltrates workplace dynamics in relation to hiring practices and promotions (Atwood et al., 2024; Butler, 2025; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Quite often also, the terms "gender" and "sex" are used interchangeably to mean the same thing. For this study, sex was understood as a category grounded in biological and physiological traits that determine whether one is a human male or human female at birth (Mafumbate et al., 2024). Like Lorber (2018) and Butler (2025), this study considers gender to be a social construct, a social institution that is used to regulate which behaviours and ways of being and doing are "appropriate and acceptable" for males and females, with the former always being favoured and the latter, less so. Simone de Beauvoir as cited in (Bart, 2000) asserted that the representation of the world is often the work of men, described from their viewpoint, and often presented as absolute truths. This is supported by Prasad and Lautoka (2015) who contended that gender is so systematically implanted in our institutions, our thinking, and our desires that it appears to be undeniably innate. Examples of this can be seen in the toys that are given to young children to play with; girls are often presented with gifts such as tea sets, kitchen sets, and dolls whereas boys are given toy guns and toy cars. This can imply that girls belong in the house, while boys should be active. These expectations may also be extreme, positioning females in subordinate roles and expecting them to be "well behaved," while males are encouraged to display aggression as a way of demonstrating manliness (Heywood, 2022).

Butler (2016) challenged these essentialist understandings of gender, which assume that masculinity should be performed by male bodies and femininity by female bodies. Instead, she advocated for gender fluidity where people can express and perform gender beyond traditional categories, which are limiting. Whilst traditional gender categories may be helpful for young children who are learning about the world and themselves, they can also be problematic. They risk limiting their agency, creating unequal expectations, and reinforcing inequality because they are oversimplified and overgeneralised ideas presented as truths about how people should be (Ellemers, 2018; Myers et al., 2010). So, whilst gender is seen as performative and open to everyone, it comes with conditions as to who can perform it with impunity (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). This study confirms the view that the categories of gender and sex are not mutually exclusive and often intersect, for example, in relation to people who may identify as LGBTQIA+. However, in adherence to conditions for the study—as laid down by the Education Bureau in Beijing, China, and the principal of the school where the study was conducted—the intersection of gender and sex was not explored within the study.

Books play an important role in helping young children learn how people beyond their immediate environment behave and experience the world (Casey et al., 2021; Lindsay, 2024). Thus, in a world so deeply influenced by prevailing notions of gender, it comes as no surprise that these ideas are also reflected in children's literature (Koss, 2015). Traditional children's books often perpetuate gender dogmas in the way that they portray male and female characters. Similarly, the notions of strength and bravery explored in this study are frequently linked to the notion of masculinity. In traditional children's books, strength and bravery are often enacted by male characters through heroic action and overcoming adversity; this may include slaying monsters, confronting danger, or embarking on quests (Kinsella et al., 2017). For female characters this is usually more subtle like showing compassion or exercising moral integrity (Lee & Chin, 2019). In this way, bravery and strength are enacted through binary gendered lenses: males as protectors and adventurers, and females as nurturers and moral exemplars. While these stories are probably well intended, they can also socialise young readers into gendered ideals about the enactment of bravery and strength. This study contributes to the literature by offering insight into how children actively negotiate meanings of bravery and strength through engagement with diverse children's literature. It seeks to address the following research question: "How does engagement with diverse texts help Grade 2 learners to expand their understandings of how bravery and strength are enacted?"

Literature Review

Gender Representations in Children's Literature

Children's literature constitutes an early and influential site of gender socialisation, and plays a significant role in shaping children's understandings of gender in that it conveys socially acceptable ideas about what it means to be male or female (Adukia et al., 2023; Ullah et al., 2014). Although not uniform, gender portrayals in children's books recurrently exhibit dominant social norms, with male characters assuming more active and independent roles, whilst female characters are portrayed as more nurturing and dependent (Ferguson, 2018; Lee & Chin, 2019). These portrayals contribute to the normalisation of disproportionate power relations, limit people's agency, and reinforce stereotypical notions related to appropriate behaviour, emotions, and sometimes, quite alarmingly, career aspirations for males and females (Pownall & Heflick, 2023; Qiu & Yoke, 2024). Whilst more recent children's literature has begun to offer more diverse portrayals of male and female characters, the shift remains uneven with stereotypical ideologies reproduced in subtle ways (Alexopoulos et al., 2022). This study confirmed that young children, and more particularly the study participants, do not necessarily passively absorb the portrayals as represented in texts; like Dilek and Boldan (2018), we acknowledge their agency as they interpret, negotiate, renegotiate, critique, and make meaning from what they have read. This highlights the significance of exploring how young children engage with, and make meaning of, gender representations in children's literature, particularly through drawings, as a participatory visual methodology (PVM) that foregrounds children's perspectives.

Diverse Children's Literature

Children's books are a valuable source of information (Derman-Sparks, 2016), yet they are not neutral, often promoting dominant cultural norms that are deemed acceptable (Monoyiou & Symeonidou, 2016). This study demonstrated that if books have the potential to influence how children see the world, then the kinds of books children engage with matters and therefore, diverse representations matter. For this study, diversity in relation to children's literature refers to texts that portray various lived and imagined realities, gender, culture, and identities amongst others (Dahlen, 2020). We deemed such narratives as important because they offer children different lenses in relation to ways of being and doing, and they also challenge traditional tropes about who is positioned as brave, strong, and heroic (Alexopoulos et al., 2022). This is done through nuanced portrayals of characters that do not rely on gender cues for depicting moral, relational, and emotional forms of courage alongside physical and combat-oriented portrayals (Ingram & Cahill, 2022). The absence of gender equitable books in relation to how characters and events are portrayed, "reinforce, legitimate, and reproduce a patriarchal gender system" (McCabe et al., 2011, p. 198).

Considering the Chinese Context

Within the Chinese context, the availability of diverse books is often shaped by broader educational and political contexts (Yang, 2016). In many public schools, learners are primarily exposed to government authorised, traditional literature that aligns with the promotion of socialist ideals and curricular priorities (Tesar et al., 2019). Many private and international schools are also often subjected to governmental scrutiny in relation to censorship of books (Wong & Kwong, 2019). Thus within this context, representations of gender and sex are often informed by more traditional and normative constructions, where expectations of masculinity and femininity may be reinforced through literature and schooling practices (Liu, 2015; Mann, 2011; Qiu, 2023). As a result, the opportunity for young learners to engage with more diverse literature is often limited. This contextual backdrop is significant for the present study because the reading club created an alternative discursive space in which learners could engage with diverse texts and reimagine concepts such as bravery and strength with the intention of expanding their possibilities. Although more diverse literature was available, it still needed to conform to the state mandated position of two genders. We recognise that this is a limitation of the study and that ideally, the learners should be exposed to a wider gender spectrum; however, we had to be content with broadening

participants' understandings of what it means to be male or female and stretch that thinking to how to enact femininity or masculinity.

Strength and Bravery in Children's Literature

Literature is an influential social sphere that reflects the culture, morality, and values of a society, and thus play a significant role in influencing children's understandings of the world (Jesudas & Alteib, 2024; Qiu & Yoke, 2024). It also influences young readers' perceptions of abstract concepts such as bravery and strength, actively constructing what these traits entail and who is positioned as possessing them (Madaminovna, 2025). Fictional texts especially, function as an important ideological site through which the readers' perceptions, values, and viewpoints can be shaped (Jesudas & Alteib, 2024). Historically, the portrayal of bravery and strength in children's literature have been constructed along gendered and stereotypical ways most often associated with male characters hinging on physical power, intelligence, determination, and individual triumph (Bosak et al., 2008; Kinsella et al., 2017). Such representations strengthen narrow and exclusionary understandings of the notions of bravery and strength, placing boys as "natural heroes" whilst marginalising girls and others whose forms of courage and strength are emotive, interpersonal, or moral, rather than physical (Qiu & Yoke, 2024).

Diverse children's literature can challenge these rigid gendered representations of bravery and strength in their nuanced portrayals of male and female characters, often representing bravery and strength as emotional resilience, being empathetic, persevering, and moral actions (Meland, 2020; Moya-Guijarro & Ventola, 2022). In doing so, it positions both female and male characters as agentic, capable, and courageous in diverse ways. Therefore, through engagement with diverse texts, children are empowered to challenge and question gender stereotypes and in this way, deconstruct and reconstruct more inclusive understandings of notions such as bravery and strength (Monoyiou & Symeonidou, 2016). This conceptual shift underpins the basis for exploring how Grade 2 learners interpret and represent bravery and strength as their drawings and discussions reveal how diverse texts mediate the meanings children attribute to these concepts.

Theoretical Underpinning

Theoretically, this study was informed by social constructionism. A key tenet of social constructionism is that reality and knowledge are not fixed, but socially constructed within the communities and the social realms people operate in (Burr & Dick, 2017). This is done through discourse, language, and interactions between people (Galbin, 2014). Related to this is the belief that there are multiple, context-specific realities (Burr, 2024). Informed by this, our study demonstrated that children's understandings of bravery and strength are shaped by social, cultural, and textual interactions. In this way, social constructionism provided a lens through which to examine how meanings related to bravery and strength are produced, negotiated, and renegotiated.

From a social constructionist perspective, the participants were regarded as individuals who had agency and as active meaning-makers, rather than inactive recipients of knowledge. This was informed by the belief held by social constructionism that knowledge is not simply passed on from adults to children; instead, it is actively constructed through social interactions, language, and experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Burr, 2024). This understanding underpinned the use of drawings as a PVM within the reading club context because we believed it was a site of social interaction that allowed participants to construct, co-construct, configure, and reconfigure their understandings. This is because social constructionism views knowledges and realities as created, rather than discovered (Andrews, 2012).

Methodology

Research Paradigm, Approach, and Design

This study was located within an interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to elucidate how individuals construct meaning within a specific context (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This fits well within the scope of the study because our aim was not to seek objective or universal truths, but rather to explore how young learners within their unique Chinese context made sense of abstract concepts such as bravery and strength through their engagement with literature and PVM. This is also consistent with tenets of social constructionism, which assert that realities and knowledges are socially mediated and manifold. Central to the interpretivist orientation is the privileging of children's voices in the process of meaning-making (Brown, 2019). Therefore, by employing PVM as a method for data generation, participants were positioned as active contributors to the meaning-making process and in so doing, foregrounded their perspectives, beliefs, and values.

A qualitative case study design was adopted to explore Grade 2 Chinese learners' insights into bravery and strength as gendered constructs. A case study design allows for an in-depth, contextualised exploration of phenomena (Algozzine & Hancock, 2017), which for this study entailed an exploration of Grade 2 Chinese learners who partook in a reading club as a bounded system. Thus, the reading club was positioned as a shared social space for literacy engagement where participants construct, co-construct, negotiate, and renegotiate subjective meanings, drawing on ideas from texts (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2016). A qualitative approach was appropriate because it emphasises participants' subjective views in the meaning-making process (Merriam, 2022).

Drawings as a Participatory Visual Methodology

A PVM positions participants as active contributors in the meaning-making process, thus recognising its potential to relay complex and nuanced ideas that extend beyond spoken and written language (Barley & Russell, 2019; de Lange et al., 2015). This study employed drawings as a PVM because for young children, drawings offer an accessible and developmentally appropriate mode of expression that allows them to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas that would be difficult to articulate verbally (Mayaba & Wood, 2015). We believed that drawings would give insight into how the participants interpreted and reproduced, or opposed gendered meanings, because drawings often reveal internalised social norms, values, and assumptions (İnözü, 2018; Leigh, 2020). Through their drawings the participants exercised their agency by selecting characters, actions, and attributes that they believed represented strength and bravery, offering nuanced insights into how gendered meanings are imagined, challenged, and reconstructed.

Contextualising the Study

The site of the study was a private bilingual school in Beijing, China. The participants were Grade 2 learners who had English as their second language. The participants all came from relatively wealthy backgrounds and attended Beijing Bilingual Fun School (pseudonym), which was geared towards preparing learners for tertiary education outside of China, but still had a strong ethos in relation to upholding Chinese values. Therefore, these children may have already been exposed to a range of children's literature and familiar with some of the traditional stories. Ethics was granted by the university ethics committee. Consent granted from the Beijing Education Bureau and school principal. Letters of invitation were sent out to all Grade 2 learners and six responded: one girl and five boys. We acknowledge this imbalance of sexes as a limitation even though considering the interpretivist tradition, the aim was not about representativeness, but in-depth exploration and meaning-making. However, the ratio of males to females may have influenced the nature of insights generated. We recognise that the fact that the study leader was male may have encouraged more boys to participate; it might have been perceived as a male preserve, and so we were encouraged that a girl was comfortable to join a seemingly male group. All participants granted assent and their parents granted consent. In line with ethical requirements, participants selected names of book characters that they used as pseudonyms throughout the study: Terry 8-year-old boy; Drake 8-

year-old boy, Little Red Riding Hood, 8-year-old girl, Pikachu, 8-year-old boy; Gruffalo 8-year-old boy; Harry Potter, 8-year-old boy.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, we adopted the criteria posited by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was strengthened by using multiple data sources including the participants' drawings as well as their written and verbal feedback allowing for triangulation and a more comprehensive understanding of participants' meanings. Dependability was supported through a clear and transparent description of the research design, data generation, and analysis processes—enabling the study to be followed and evaluated. Confirmability was addressed by adopting a reflexive stance on the part of the researchers by acknowledging our roles in the interpretive process while grounding analysis in the participants' visual, written, and verbal data. Finally, while this study is context-specific, transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the research context and participants, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other settings.

Data Generation

Data were generated for 16 weeks over a 3-month period. Participants gathered for 16 reading club sessions as part of an after-school activity in a comfortable space in the school library. At the weekly gatherings, participants had access to a wide variety of traditional and diverse children's books. As a group, participants decided which books would be read weekly. Participants appeared to prefer reading diverse, non-traditional stories, because of the 16 books read, 10 were books we classified as diverse and the remainder, traditional. Their reasons for this included the peculiarity of the titles or the idea that they could learn something from the books. Some of the titles of books read include, *Princesses Can Be Pirates too* by Christi Zellerhof, *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* by Jane Yolen and Heidi Stemple, *10 000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert, *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch*, Freddie and the Fairy* by Julia Donaldson, and *Sleeping Bobby* by Mary Osborne and Will Osborne amongst others.[5] Once a selection was made, the book was read aloud in round-robin style. Participants either shared books or if just one copy of the book was available, it was projected using a document camera. After each book was read, participants engaged in discussing the books. A model for talking about text (see Addendum A) informed by Chambers (1993), but adapted for this study was used to stimulate discussions and scaffold the participants' responses, given their English second language (ESL) proficiency. Participants were not bound to use the model for talking about text and were free to express their ideas in a way that felt natural to them.

Participants were invited to make two drawings as a way of gaining insight into their understandings of strength and bravery. The first drawing was done in Week 1 as a representation of their initial understandings and the last drawing in Week 16 to capture any shifts in thinking. For the first drawing, participants were given the prompt: "Draw a picture of a book character that you think is brave and strong." For the final drawing, participants were given the prompt: "From the books we have read, draw a picture of a character that you think is brave and strong." The prompts were also given in Chinese. Alongside their drawings, the participants were also asked to give written and verbal feedback. In all instances, the participants' written and verbal feedback was the same. Given that the participants were all ESL, we acknowledge that their linguistic limitations may have constrained their written and verbal feedback. However, the convergence of visual, written, and verbal data further strengthened the interpretations of their drawings.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) relates to systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into meaning across data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Participants' drawings were regarded as visual texts and therefore TA was used to explore patterns in the participants' representations of bravery and strength. Guided by

[5] A full list of the books read over the 16 weeks is provided as Addendum B.

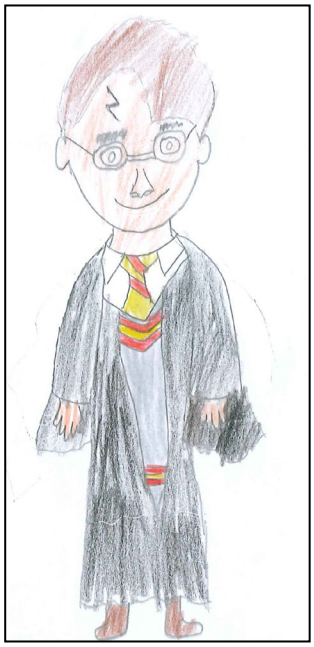
the interpretivist paradigm, an inductive approach to TA was employed. Inductive thematic analysis relates to searching for meaning within the data set rather than predetermined categories. In this way we moved from data to themes to theory and literature (Liu, 2016). Using inductive TA allowed for themes to be generated from the participants' drawings and their verbal and written feedback, which accompanied the drawings. Thus, in this way, recognising that meanings were co-constructed and contextually situated.

Results and Analysis

From the participants' initial drawings, two themes were generated: Bravery and Strength as Physical Power and Combat; and Superhuman Abilities as Markers of Bravery and Strength. Within the first theme, a sub-theme was generated as well: Relational Strength Within Combat Narratives. These initial drawings reflect dominant, stereotypical constructions of bravery and strength.

Theme 1: Bravery and Strength as Physical Power and Combat

The first theme of the participants' initial drawings of characters who are brave and strong is closely linked to battle, defeating wickedness, and physical power. The drawings and the accompanying feedback frequently denote weapons, engaging in combat, and defeating opponents, reflecting popular narratives that associate bravery and strength with heroism, aggression, and dominance.



Terry

Harry Potter is very brave because he and his two friends battle with Vordemort and won.

In this drawing, Terry depicted Harry Potter as a symbol of strength and bravery and, together with his verbal and written feedback, he justified this because along with his friends, he (Harry Potter), defeated Voldemort. This depiction reflects an understanding of strength and bravery associated with battle, valour, and the defeat of an antagonist, drawing on dominant narrative tropes popular in children's literature that associate bravery and strength with battle, and victory over evil.

Drake

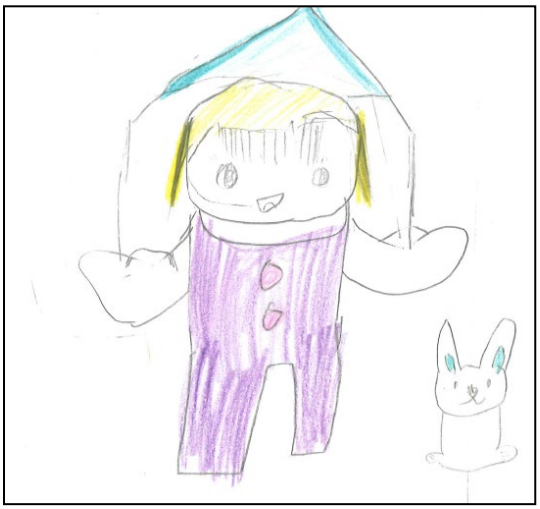
sun wu kong his from the book xi you ji. I think his strong because he has a powerful weapon named jin gu bang and he has many powers.

In this illustration, Drake depicts Sun Wukong, rationalising that he believes he is strong because he possesses a weapon and special powers. This depiction supports an understanding of bravery and strength as rooted in physical power, weaponry, and superhuman abilities. It reflects prevalent heroic narratives in children's literature where strength and bravery manifest through remarkable capabilities.

Sub-Theme 1: Relational Strength Within Combat Narratives

Within the broader theme of Bravery and Strength as Physical Power and Combat, a sub-theme of Relational Strength Within Combat Narratives emerged.

Little Red Riding Hood



The clever Giant because she helped little Rabbit fight a mean giant and litt Rabbit very like the giant. And help little rabbit pick her's house to the other place.

In this illustration, Little Red Riding Hood depicted The Clever Giant as brave and strong, not solely because she confronted the mean giant, but also because she guarded and aided the rabbit, carrying its house to safety. This drawing with its accompanied feedback restructures the notion of battle-oriented strength by integrating care, safeguarding, and support—proposing that strength and bravery can also be conveyed through relational and benevolent gestures rather than by hostility and domination only.

Theme 2: Superhuman Abilities as Markers of Bravery and Strength

The second theme from the participants' initial drawing associated bravery and strength with extraordinary, fantastical capabilities. Participants portrayed characters with supernatural powers and invulnerability suggesting that bravery and strength are linked to possessing exceptional traits.

Pikachu

I think Jack and Annie are brave and strong because they can get to lots of places on the magic tree house and never get hurt. Jack and Annie are my favourite book: Magic tree house

Pikachu has drawn Annie and Jack from *The Magic Tree House* as characters who are brave and strong because of their ability to get to multiple places without getting harmed. This may suggest that he associates bravery and strength with invulnerability and exceptional mobility, positioning the characters as brave and strong because they navigate danger and unknown situations without risk. This depiction reflects a fantastical framing of bravery and strength where safety, exploration, and extraordinary capabilities are conflated with valour, reinforcing popular notions that bravery and strength are tied to superhuman or miraculous powers.

Harry Potter

Jack in "Magic tree House" because they have many super power to go back to many place for many reason.

Harry Potter also depicted Jack from *The Magic Tree House* as brave and strong because he possesses superpowers that allow him to travel to many places. Like Pikachu's drawing, Harry Potter also connects bravery and strength with extraordinary abilities, particularly ease of movement and power beyond what humans usually do. Of particular interest, is the absence of Annie, which positions Jack as the sole heroic symbol. This in a way, indirectly replicates gendered narratives that favour male characters as sole enactors of bravery and strength within adventure contexts.

Analysis of the participants' second drawings generated two themes which reflected more nuanced understandings of gender: Rethinking Heroism Through Female Agency and Clever Resistance and Bravery and Strength as Emotional Resilience and Identity Affirmation.

Theme 1: Rethinking Heroism Through Female Agency and Clever Resistance

The first theme from the participants' second drawing highlights the participants' representations of females as active agents who save the day and solve problems. These depictions challenge gendered narratives in relation to bravery and strength by positioning a female character as a courageous protagonist who uses intelligence, rather than combat or weaponry, to overcome challenges.

Little Red Riding Hood

The paper bag princess because she helped the prine to get out of the drangon cave

Little Red Riding Hood depicted The Paper Bag Princess, wearing a paper bag as a dress, smiling, in front of a cave. In her feedback, she noted that The Paper Bag Princess was brave and strong because she helped the prince escape from the dragon's cave. In this representation, the princess is a proactive hero, rather than led by the plot. In this way, it challenges dominant narratives where princes typically save princesses. The happy portrayal of the princess also challenges visual tropes in children's literature where heroes and heroines are often portrayed as aggressive and stern. Thus, the portrayal also suggests that bravery and strength can be conveyed through positive emotions and confidence.

Harry Potter

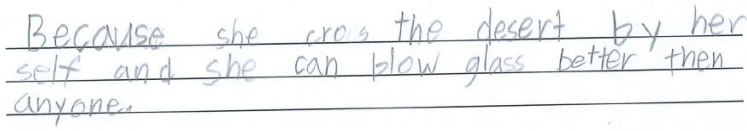
She was brave to "fight" with the dragon and was clever to save the prinse.

Like Terry, Harry Potter also depicted The Paper Bag Princess wearing a paper bag as a dress and this time, with her hands behind her back. He explained that The Paper Bag Princess is brave and strong because she was able to "fight" the dragon and was clever to save the prince. The scare quotes are significant because they signal that the princess does not use combat to save the day as seen in children's literature generally; instead, she uses wit and intelligence to outsmart the dragon. This depiction thus challenges dominant portrayals of saving the day by positioning the princess as an involved and clever rescuer with her relaxed portrayal challenging visual tropes associated with heroism and aggression and physical supremacy. Together, the feedback and visual components suggest an alternate framing of heroism characterised by confidence, cleverness, and positive emotions.

Theme 2: Bravery and Strength as Emotional Resilience and Identity Affirmation

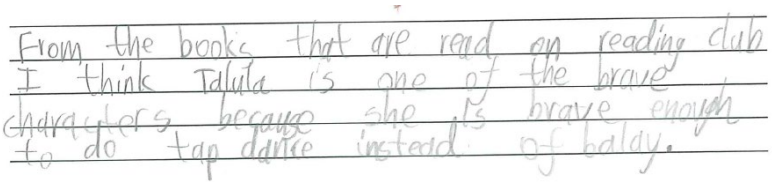
The second theme of the participants' final drawing foregrounds bravery and strength as expressive, moral, and identity-focused attributes. Participants portrayed characters who, despite criticism, pursued personal interests or resisted perceived social norms. This illustrates a shift in understandings of bravery and strength as everyday acts of authenticity, resilience, and willpower.

Drake



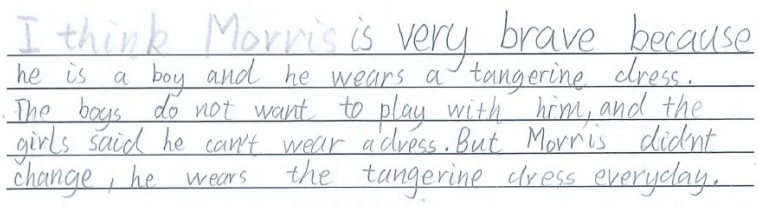
Drake drew a picture of Elena smiling. He explained that Elena was brave and strong because she crossed the desert by herself and learned how to blow glass better than anyone else. This portrayal positions bravery and strength as determination, self-confidence, and capacity building. The happy, confident portrayal further suggests that bravery and strength can be associated with confidence and fulfilment, reiterating the idea that aggression and physical dominance are not the only ways of enacting bravery and strength.

Pikachu



Pickachu illustrated Talula, smiling, as a character who is brave and strong. He explained that she attempted tap dance even though she was more skilled at ballet. In this way, the portrayal positions bravery and strength as a willingness to step outside familiar territory and to embrace challenge and vulnerability. Her happy portrayal may signal that bravery and strength are associated with self-development, self-confidence, and positive sense of self, rather than perfection.

Terry



Terry depicted Morris wearing a dress and appearing to be content. He explained that Morris is “very brave” because he was a boy wearing a dress and as a result the boys would not play with him and the girls told him he could not wear the dress. Despite the rejection from his peers, Morris chose not to change and continued to wear the dress daily. This portrayal positions bravery as resisting gendered norms and social pressure and in so doing, positioning strength as the ability to maintain one’s individuality even when facing marginalisation and critique.

Discussion

The study explored Grade 2 Chinese learners' insights into the notions of bravery and strength by engaging them with traditional and diverse literature in a reading club, and by using drawings as a PVM. The analysis of the participants' initial and final drawings revealed a notable shift in their conceptualisations of bravery and strength. Initially the participants associated bravery and strength with weaponry, combat, extraordinary powers, and physical dominance, which reflected dominant cultural narratives associated with these notions (Bosak et al., 2008; Kinsella et al., 2017). Characters such as Harry Potter, Sun Wukong, and Jack and Annie were portrayed as brave and strong because they conquered adversaries, possessed powerful weapons, or could travel without harm. These portrayals align with hegemonic conceptualisations of heroism customary in children's literature whereby notions such as bravery and strength are often masculinised and linked with physical domination and aggression (Adukia et al., 2023; Kinsella et al., 2017; Ullah et al., 2014). From a social constructionist perspective, these initial drawings exemplify how children draw on accessible cultural discourses to construct meanings related to bravery and strength, reproducing normative narratives they come across in media and literature (Galbin, 2014).

Following sustained engagement and the availability of diverse texts in the reading club, and the fact that the participants grew and matured in the process, the participants' understandings shifted and, in their drawings, they presented more nuanced understandings of bravery and strength. These include enacting bravery and strength through female agency, emotional resilience, and identity affirmation. In their final drawing, participants depicted girls saving princes, characters persisting when faced with social pressures, and individuals pursuing personal interests despite the difficulties faced. These shifts indicate that exposure and engagement with diverse literature can broaden children's conceptualisations of bravery and strength beyond gender binaries (Alexopoulos et al., 2022). The diverse portrayals of characters provided participants with alternative representations that disrupted narrow, gendered, and heroic tropes, allowing them to restructure, reconstruct, and re-author their understandings of what it means to be brave and strong. These findings suggest that children's understandings of notions such as bravery and strength are not fixed, but are socially constructed and responsive to social interactions as posited by social constructionism theory (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Burr & Dick, 2017).

The drawings portraying *The Paper Bag Princess* to illustrate bravery and strength, show how the participants reconfigured gendered narratives related to these notions. Linked to this is also how they portrayed her—smiling and relaxed—thus further disrupting typical visual depictions of heroism that associate bravery and strength with aggression or sternness. In these portrayals, they highlight that bravery and strength can coexist with joy, poise, and independence (Ingram & Cahill, 2022). The conclusions drawn from this resonate with gender performativity and social constructionism perspectives that emphasise that gendered identities and roles are socially constructed and open to negotiation and challenge (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Butler, 2025; Lorber, 2018).

The participants' illustrations of Talula, Elena, and Morris underscored bravery and strength as inner strength, determination, and owning your identities. Elena's voyage across the desert to become a glassblower was understood as courage rooted in unconventionality and self-development, whereas Talula's choice to partake in ballet despite struggling, was highlighted as bravery for taking a risk. Morris's determination in wearing a dress, despite exclusion and rejection was interpreted as self-love and self-respect, and resistance to rigid gendered norms. Morris's exclusion by his peers exemplifies the argument by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) that although gender performances are open to everyone because we all have agency, there are conditions as to who can perform what with impunity. The positioning of Morris, Elena, and Talula by the participants aligns with Butler's (2016) rejection of essentialist assumptions related to ways of being and doing that assume masculinity and femininity are inherently connected to male and female bodies. In their drawings, participants showed that they understood that bravery and strength are performative and open to restructuring and reimagination across gendered identities. These depictions also transcend dominant interpretations of bravery and strength in traditional

children's literature to include moral, emotional, and identity-based components, aligning with more inclusive understandings of these notions as interpersonal and ethical, as opposed to exclusively physical. These findings speak to the transformative potential of engaging young children with diverse literary inputs that can expand their understandings of ways of being in the world, and support more inclusive understandings (Dahlen, 2020; Derman-Sparks, 2016).

From a social constructionist perspective, the findings validate that children are active meaning-makers who interpret, negotiate, and occasionally challenge the meanings entrenched in cultural texts (Dilek & Boldan, 2018). The reading club served as a sociocultural space where participants could engage with diverse literature, discuss characters (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2016) and events, and visually symbolise their interpretations. The shift from combat-based to relational and identity-based conceptualisations of bravery and strength highlights how children's meanings are shaped through interaction with diverse texts and peers. The use of drawings as a PVM aided the participants, who are ESL speakers, to communicate complex and nuanced understandings that they may not have easily been able to do using spoken language.

Implications

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings highlight the potential of engaging readers with diverse literature for expanding conceptualisations of bravery, strength, and other gendered norms. For classroom practice, this may imply the deliberate selection and inclusion of diverse literature and dialogic engagements with texts. In this way, classrooms become sites of social change where normative assumptions are disrupted and reimagined.

Methodological Reflections

The use of drawings as a PVM enabled the elicitation of participants' perceptions, especially given their age and ESL status. The consistency between the participants' drawings and their written and verbal feedback strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings and allowed for the triangulation of visual and verbal data. Positioning the participants as active agents, and steering away from guiding them towards preconceived notions, aligned with the interpretivist positioning of this study, which enabled authentic portrayals from participants as meaning-makers.

Limitations

This qualitative study involved five boys and one girl; the imbalance of sexes is acknowledged as a limitation especially given the study's focus on gender representations. The participants' ESL status may also have constrained their in-depth verbal and written feedback.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated that young children's understandings of bravery and strength are socially constructed, and responsive to pedagogical and literary input. Initially, the participants' representations signalled combat-based and super heroic narratives. Engaging with diverse texts enabled them to reimagine ways of being and doing related to bravery and strength as relational, emotional, and identity-based attributes. These findings foreground the transformative potential of diverse and gender-fair literature, and participatory pedagogies in supporting children's engagement with gender and identity related concepts by expanding the possibilities for how bravery and strength are imagined and enacted. From a social change and social justice perspective, the study highlighted how early intervention in the form of diverse literature can challenge exclusionary narratives and promote and cultivate more inclusive imaginaries related to gender and identity.

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School Community Partnerships for Promoting Sustainable Learning Practices in Rural Primary Schools[6]

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Abstract

This article examines how sustainable learning can be enhanced among vulnerable learners in primary schools. The article is framed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and contemporary resilience scholarship. It adopts an interpretive qualitative design within a doctoral research project focused on school-community partnerships that support resilience and sustainable learning practices in rural primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Data were generated through focus group discussions, reflective journals, and interviews with educators. They were analysed thematically to illuminate how learners and teachers co-construct adaptive strategies in challenging socioeconomic conditions. Findings reveal that sustainable learning and resilience in learners are not fixed personal attributes but a relational and contextual process fostered through caring pedagogies, life skills education, and supportive school-community partnerships. Learners' psychosocial competence, self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and problem-solving emerged as central to both well-being and academic engagement. When teachers integrated culturally relevant life-skills activities and strengths-based feedback, learners displayed enhanced self-efficacy, adaptability, and hope. Conversely, deficit-oriented practices and rigid academic expectations undermined resilience. The paper concludes that enhancing sustainable learning requires transforming schools into ecosystems of care and sustainability, linking social-emotional learning with equity, digital access, and ecological awareness. Policy recommendations include embedding resilience education within the national curriculum, equipping teachers with trauma-informed practice, and aligning the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support framework with cross-sectoral well-being initiatives. By conceptualising resilience as a foundation for sustainable learning, this study contributes to global debates on inclusive education, social justice, and the ethics of care in post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords: resilience, sustainable learning, psychosocial competence, vulnerable learners, South Africa, life-skills education, inclusive pedagogy, participatory action research

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Introduction

Educational resilience has emerged as a central theme in discussions about quality and equity in South African schooling. Persistent socioeconomic inequalities, compounded by the legacies of apartheid, continue to shape learners' access to quality education (Spaull & Jansen, 2019). Children from impoverished communities, rural schools, and under-resourced urban areas often face multiple intersecting vulnerabilities: poverty, food insecurity, trauma, and limited psychosocial support. These conditions make sustainable learning difficult to achieve unless schools intentionally become spaces of care, connection, and resilience-building (Theron, 2021).

In response to these challenges, the Building Resilience for Sustainable Learning project (Mbambo-Mkhwanazi & Hlalele, 2023) sought to understand how educators can empower vulnerable learners to overcome adversity through psychosocially responsive pedagogical practices. Grounded in the belief that resilience is not merely an innate trait but a dynamic, context-dependent process (Ungar, 2019), the project explored how supportive relationships and learner agency could be cultivated within schools. The study was situated in the broader discourse of education for sustainable development (ESD), aligning with UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates for inclusive, equitable, and quality education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Resilience, in this framework, is viewed as the capacity of individuals and systems to adapt positively to significant adversity (Masten, 2021). For vulnerable learners, this means more than academic perseverance; it involves emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and a sense of belonging within the school environment (Theron & Donald, 2023). Schools thus serve as critical sites for building psychosocial competence, where teachers act as both educators and emotional anchors. As Donald et al. (2022) argued, sustainable learning occurs when learners' emotional, social, and cognitive needs are holistically addressed.

While existing studies have acknowledged the role of social support and teacher–learner relationships in fostering resilience (Mampane, 2020; Theron, 2021), fewer have examined how educators conceptualise and operationalise resilience within their pedagogical and relational practices. This study, therefore, bridges that gap by examining the lived experiences of teachers and learners within vulnerable schooling contexts. By analysing narratives emerging from the Building Resilience for Sustainable Learning initiative, it seeks to illuminate how schools can become resilience-enabling environments where learners are not merely surviving adversity but developing the skills and dispositions necessary for sustainable learning and lifelong growth.

At a conceptual level, the paper situates resilience within a social-ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Ungar, 2019), recognising that learner outcomes are shaped by interactions between individuals, families, schools, and communities. It also draws on the ethics of care framework (Noddings, 2012), which emphasises relational interdependence and empathy as foundations for human development. Integrating these frameworks allows for a multidimensional understanding of resilience that foregrounds relationships, context, and social justice.

Furthermore, the paper engages with recent scholarship (2020–2025) that expands the concept of resilience beyond individual adaptation to include transformative resilience, the capacity of schools and systems to change in ways that reduce vulnerability and promote equity (Johnson & Winthrop, 2022; Theron & Liebenberg, 2023). This shift reflects a significant evolution in resilience research, from focusing on "beating the odds" to "changing the odds" (Ungar, 2019). It aligns with South Africa's post-2015 educational agenda, which calls for inclusive, caring, and socially responsive schools (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2019).

This study thus contributes to three interrelated discourses:

1. Educational resilience as a dynamic, relational process.
2. Sustainable learning as a goal that integrates emotional and academic well-being.
3. Inclusive education as a vehicle for equity and social transformation.

By exploring these themes through an empirical case, the paper argues that fostering resilience in vulnerable learners requires a systemic, culturally responsive approach grounded in care, collaboration, and contextual sensitivity. The following sections detail the theoretical foundations, methodology, and findings that support this claim.

Theoretical Framework

The Building Resilience for Sustainable Learning project was conceptually grounded in a social-ecological framework of resilience (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Ungar, 2019) and informed by the ethics of care (Noddings, 2012) and the principles of ESD (UNESCO, 2020). Together, these frameworks provided a multidimensional lens for understanding how resilience is cultivated among vulnerable learners within the complex social realities of South African schooling. Rather than viewing resilience as an individual trait or static outcome, the project conceptualised it as a dynamic, relational, and context-sensitive process that evolves through interactions between learners, educators, families, and broader community systems (Theron, 2021).

Literature Review

The Social-Ecological Perspective on Resilience

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory provides a foundational understanding of how human development is shaped by nested environmental systems: the microsystem (immediate environments such as family and school), mesosystem (interactions between these settings), exosystem (broader social structures), and macrosystem (cultural and policy contexts). Within this model, resilience is not viewed as an attribute residing solely within the child but as an emergent property of reciprocal interactions between the individual and their environment (Ungar, 2019).

In South African schools, where learners often face socioeconomic hardships, this ecological framing highlights the importance of supportive microsystems such as teacher–learner relationships and peer support networks (Theron & Donald, 2023). These immediate contexts can buffer the effects of adversity and promote adaptive functioning. At the mesosystemic level, collaboration between schools, families, and community organisations enhances the collective capacity to support learners' emotional and academic needs (Mampane, 2020). Policies and institutional practices at the exosystem and macrosystem levels, such as inclusive education policies and district-level psychosocial services, also play critical roles in enabling or constraining resilience-building processes (DBE, 2019).

Ungar's (2021) social-ecological model extends Bronfenbrenner's ideas by emphasising navigation and negotiation. According to Ungar, resilient individuals are those who can navigate to resources that sustain their well-being, and negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally and contextually meaningful ways. Within vulnerable school contexts, resilience thus depends not only on learners' individual coping capacities but also on the availability, accessibility, and meaningfulness of external support systems. This distinction is vital for sustainable learning because it shifts the responsibility for resilience from individuals to systems, requiring schools to become resource-rich ecosystems of support.

The Ethics of Care as a Relational Pedagogy

Complementing the social-ecological approach, Noddings' (2012) ethics of care provides a moral and relational foundation for resilience-building in educational spaces. Care theory posits that relationships are at the heart of ethical and educational practice. It asserts that genuine human connection, empathy, and attentiveness are prerequisites for meaningful learning and well-being (Gilligan, 2014). In contexts of vulnerability, where learners may experience neglect, trauma, or exclusion, caring pedagogies serve as protective factors that foster emotional safety and a sense of belonging (Theron, 2021).

In the Building Resilience for Sustainable Learning project, teachers who demonstrated responsive care through consistent encouragement, patience, and relational attunement were observed to enhance learners' confidence and engagement. This finding aligns with contemporary research that emphasises the importance of caring teacher–learner relationships in predicting resilience and positive academic trajectories, particularly among marginalised learners (Botha & van Niekerk, 2022; Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2023).

Recent studies have further refined the concept of care to include critical and transformative care, where educators consciously challenge inequities and structural barriers that affect learners' well-being (Beyers, 2022). This approach aligns with Freire's (1970) notion of praxis, which involves reflection and action directed at transforming oppressive realities. Within South African schools, transformative care implies not only attending to learners' emotional needs but also addressing systemic injustices such as poverty, stigma, and under-resourcing that undermine sustainable learning.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Psychosocial Competence

Resilience and care must be understood within the broader educational vision of sustainability. The UNESCO (2020) framework for ESD calls for learning that equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to contribute to a more just and sustainable future. ESD is inherently holistic, integrating cognitive, socioemotional, and behavioural learning dimensions. In this sense, it converges with the psychosocial orientation of resilience theory, which similarly emphasises adaptive capacities, empathy, collaboration, and problem-solving (Mhlongo & Walton, 2021).

In the context of vulnerable learners, sustainable learning is achieved when educational processes build psychosocial competence—the capacity to manage emotional, social, and cognitive challenges in adaptive ways (World Health Organization, 2021). As Mbambo-Mkhwanazi and Hlalele (2023) demonstrated, resilience-building practices such as reflective journaling, peer mentoring, and emotional literacy activities can strengthen these competencies, enabling learners to persist and thrive in the face of adversity.

Rieckmann (2018) further argued that sustainable education requires key competencies including critical thinking, systemic thinking, and collaboration—all of which were nurtured through the community-linked projects in this study. The integration of ESD with resilience and care frameworks highlights the reciprocal relationship between individual empowerment and systemic transformation. While resilience allows learners to adapt within existing conditions, sustainability demands that educational systems themselves become more just, inclusive, and nurturing (Theron & Liebenberg, 2023). Thus, ESD serves as the macro-level driver that ensures resilience is not limited to coping with adversity but extends to reimagining and restructuring learning environments for long-term equity and well-being.

Synthesising the Framework

Taken together, the social-ecological, care, and ESD frameworks form a coherent theoretical triad that underpins this study. The social-ecological perspective situates resilience within multi-layered systems of support; the ethics of care foregrounds the relational and moral dimensions of educational practice, and

ESD provides the aspirational vision of sustainability that aligns micro-level resilience processes with macro-level educational transformation.

This integrated framework acknowledges that resilience among vulnerable learners is relationally co-constructed, emerging through interactions between caring educators, supportive peers, engaged families, and enabling institutional systems. It also recognises that sustainable learning requires transformative resilience, where schools evolve into inclusive, empathetic, and resourceful ecosystems capable of supporting all learners.

In summary, this theoretical synthesis positions resilience as a systemic and transformative process that bridges psychosocial well-being and educational sustainability. The following section outlines the methodological approach employed to explore how these theoretical principles manifested in the lived realities of teachers and learners participating in the Building Resilience for Sustainable Learning project.

Methodology

Research Paradigm and Design

This study was situated within the Critical Emancipatory Research (CER) paradigm (Boog, 2003; Nkoane, 2021), complemented by a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design. The choice of CER was informed by its commitment to transformation, participation, and social justice principles that align with the aims of building resilience and promoting sustainable learning among vulnerable learners. CER acknowledges that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by power relations (Kemmis et al., 2014). Therefore, research participants were not positioned as passive subjects but as co-researchers whose lived experiences and contextual knowledge informed both the process and the outcomes of the study.

The PAR design was employed as a practical methodology within this emancipatory framework. It enabled the collaborative development of locally grounded solutions through cycles of reflection, action, and evaluation (Kindon et al., 2007). PAR's participatory nature was particularly suitable for a project concerned with sustainable learning because it fostered ownership, agency, and community engagement—key conditions for long-term resilience (Bergold & Thomas, 2019). Through this approach, the research became not only a process of inquiry but also a process of empowerment for participants.

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in the uMkhanyakude district of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, a deep rural region characterised by high levels of poverty, limited educational resources, and social vulnerability. According to district data, unemployment in the area exceeds 90 per cent, and approximately 70 per cent of households rely on social grants. The participating community faced multiple intersecting challenges: inadequate infrastructure (limited electricity, poor road networks, no clinics within 20 km), a shortage of psychosocial support services (no educational psychologists within the district), and high rates of child-headed households due to HIV/AIDS-related deaths.

Despite these constraints, schools in the area demonstrated strong communal networks and a commitment to learner well-being. Three primary schools participated in the study, each with multi-grade classrooms (Grades R–7), feeding schemes operating daily, and active school governing bodies. The schools serve approximately 450 learners collectively, with an average learner-to-teacher ratio of 35:1. A total of 12 participants were purposively selected as core co-researchers. This group comprised:

Participant Category	Pseudonym	Role/Background	Selection Criteria
Teachers (n = 4)	Thandi, Sipho, Nomusa, Bongani	Foundation Phase (2), Intermediate Phase (2); teaching experience 8–25 years	Active involvement in learner support initiatives; willing to commit 8 months
Learners (n = 4)	Nokuthula, Sabelo, Zinhle, Mandla	Grade 6–7 learners (2 male, 2 female); ages 12–15	Identified by teachers as demonstrating leadership potential; orphaned or vulnerable background
Social Worker	Nomvula	Department of Social Development; serves 15 schools	Only social worker covering the district
Nurse	Gladys	Local clinic (mobile)	Provides health education in schools
Police Officer	Jabulani	SAPS Youth Desk	Runs crime prevention programmes
Youth Leader	Siphiwe	Community volunteer; age 22	Established youth savings club

The inclusion of diverse voices was intentional, reflecting the study's social-ecological orientation and ensuring that resilience was examined through multiple lenses (Ungar, 2019). Participants were selected based on their ongoing involvement with youth support initiatives and their willingness to engage collaboratively in reflective research processes. Written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants and from parents/guardians of learner participants.

Participatory Action Research Implementation

The PAR process was implemented over eight months (March–October 2023) and comprised three complete cycles. Each cycle followed the PAR spiral of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Kemmis et al., 2014).

Cycle 1: Problem Identification and Relationship Building (Weeks 1–8)

- Planning: Initial meetings with school principals to introduce the project; community mapping exercise.
- Action: Formation of the co-researcher team; participatory workshop on resilience concepts; establishment of ground rules and ethical protocols.
- Observation: Documentation of community assets and challenges; identification of priority areas.
- Reflection: Collective analysis of initial findings; consensus on focus areas for intervention.

During this cycle, co-researchers decided that interventions should address three priority areas: emotional support for learners, economic empowerment linking to learning, and strengthening community networks. The researcher facilitated but did not direct these decisions.

Cycle 2: Co-design and Pilot Interventions (Weeks 9–20)

- Planning: Sub-committees formed around each priority area; intervention strategies co-designed.
- Action: Pilot implementation of: (a) peer mentoring programme (15 learner pairs); (b) school vegetable garden linked to entrepreneurship curriculum; (c) community resource mapping workshop.
- Observation: Regular documentation through photographs, meeting minutes, and observation notes.
- Reflection: Mid-cycle review meeting where participants evaluated pilot interventions and made adjustments.

Cycle 3: Reflection, Consolidation, and Evaluation (Weeks 21–32)

- Planning: Co-design of evaluation framework; preparation for sustainability planning.
- Action: Full implementation of refined interventions; community showcase event.
- Observation: Systematic data collection through focus group discussions (FGDs) and written reflections.
- Reflection: Final participatory analysis workshop where co-researchers interpreted findings collectively and developed sustainability recommendations.

Throughout all cycles, the researcher's role shifted from facilitator in Cycle 1 to co-learner and resource person in Cycles 2 and 3. Decision-making was democratic, with each co-researcher having equal voice in prioritising actions and interpreting outcomes.

Data Generation Methods

Data were generated through FGDs and free writing reflections (FWRs). These methods were selected for their alignment with PAR principles of dialogue, participation, and voice.

Focus Group Discussions

The FGDs provided a platform for dialogic engagement, allowing participants to share experiences, debate ideas, and co-construct understandings of vulnerability and resilience within their school and community contexts (Wilkinson, 2015).

FGD Composition and Scheduling

- Youth group: Four learners (Nokuthula, Sabelo, Zinhle, Mandla). Met three times (once per cycle) for 60–90 minutes per session. Sessions held in the school library after hours, with refreshments provided.
- Adult stakeholder group: Eight participants (four teachers + four community stakeholders). Met three times (once per cycle) for 90–120 minutes per session. Sessions held in the community hall on Saturday mornings.

Total: Six FGD sessions across both groups.

FGD Facilitation Process

- Sessions were co-facilitated by the researcher and one co-researcher (rotating).
- Each session began with a check-in and review of previous discussions.

- Discussions were conducted in isiZulu (participants' home language) to ensure authentic expression.
- Sessions were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim, then translated to English by a professional translator and verified by the researcher.

Guiding Questions

For Cycle 1 (Problem identification):

- What does resilience look like in our community? Can you share examples of learners who have overcome challenges?
- What are the biggest challenges that make it difficult for learners to succeed in school?
- How do we currently support each other when facing difficulties?

For Cycle 2 (Action reflection):

- What has changed since we started our interventions? What is working well?
- What challenges have we encountered in implementing our plans?
- What should we adjust moving forward?

For Cycle 3 (Evaluation):

- Looking back over the past months, what have we learned about building resilience?
- What changes have we seen in learners, teachers, or the community?
- What should continue after this project ends?

Free Writing Reflections

The FWRs complemented FGDs by enabling participants to articulate personal insights in an unstructured and introspective manner. This method was particularly valuable for learners, who could express their thoughts creatively without the constraints of formal interviews.

Prompt Provided

At the end of Cycle 1, participants were given the following prompt (in isiZulu and English):

> Over the next few weeks, as we work together on this project, please write down your thoughts, feelings, and observations. You can write about anything related to resilience, learning, and our work together. Some things you might consider:
>
> - A moment when you felt supported or supported someone else.
> - A challenge you faced and how you handled it.
> - Something you learned about yourself or others.
> - Your hopes for learners in our community.
> - Any ideas you have for making our school more supportive.

> Write freely—there are no right or wrong answers. You can write in isiZulu or English. If you prefer, you can draw or use a combination of words and pictures. Your reflections will help us understand resilience from your perspective.

Coordination Process

- Each participant received a dedicated notebook and pen at the end of Cycle 1.
- Participants were invited to write as often as they wished, with no minimum requirement.
- Notebooks were collected at the start of Cycle 3 (after approximately four months).
- Participants who preferred typing could submit digital reflections via email or WhatsApp.
- Confidentiality was assured. Only the researcher read the reflections, and identifying information was removed during analysis.
- At the final workshop, participants could choose to share excerpts from their reflections with the group.

All 12 participants submitted written reflections, with entries ranging from three to 15 pages. Learner reflections included drawings, poems, and personal stories. Adult reflections tended to be more analytical, documenting observations of change processes.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (TA), following Braun and Clarke's (2019) 6-phase approach: familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. The research team collectively engaged in collaborative coding, a process consistent with participatory and emancipatory principles.

Analysis Process

1. Familiarisation: All transcripts and reflections were read multiple times by the researcher and two co-researcher volunteers who participated in the analysis workshop.
2. Initial coding: In a 2-day participatory workshop, co-researchers identified meaningful segments of text and assigned preliminary codes. Coding was done on large paper sheets with colour-coded sticky notes.
3. Theme development: Codes were grouped into potential themes through discussion and consensus. Co-researchers debated the relationships between codes until agreement was reached.
4. Theme review: Themes were checked against the entire dataset. Disconfirming evidence was actively sought and discussed.
5. Theme definition: Each theme was named and defined collaboratively, with co-researchers contributing to the wording.
6. Reporting: The researcher drafted the findings section, which was then reviewed by co-researchers for accuracy and resonance with their experiences.

The use of TA allowed for flexibility in engaging with both inductive and deductive insights. Inductively, the analysis surfaced themes grounded in participants' lived experiences. Deductively, these themes were interpreted through the lens of the theoretical framework, ensuring conceptual coherence.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Trustworthiness was enhanced through multiple strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria:

- Credibility: Prolonged engagement (eight months in field); triangulation (multiple data sources, multiple participant groups); member checking (participants reviewed findings); peer debriefing with doctoral supervisor.
- Transferability: Thick description of context, participants, and processes to enable readers to assess applicability to their settings.
- Dependability: Systematic documentation of all research decisions through reflective field notes; audit trail maintained.
- Confirmability: Reflexive journaling by researcher to bracket assumptions; findings grounded in participant voices rather than researcher preconceptions.

By integrating participatory, reflective, and rigorous methods, the study upheld both the ethical and epistemological integrity required for research that seeks to empower rather than extract.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the FGDs and FWRs revealed how vulnerable learners, educators, and community members collaboratively cultivated resilience as a foundation for sustainable learning in rural KwaZulu-Natal. Three overarching and interrelated themes emerged, each presented below with empirical evidence followed by theoretical interpretation.

Theme 1: Creating Youth-Centric and Caring Learning Ecologies

Empirical Findings

Participants across all groups emphasised the importance of safe, inclusive, and caring learning environments as the foundation of both resilience and sustainable learning. Teachers described how nurturing relationships and empathetic engagement transformed classroom spaces into "zones of support" rather than "zones of deficit."

Teacher Perspectives

Thandi, a Foundation Phase teacher with 15 years' experience, explained:

> I realised that before I can teach a child anything, I must first make them feel safe. Many of my learners come to school hungry, some have not slept well because they share a small room with many people. If I shout at them for not doing homework, I am adding to their burden. Instead, I started greeting each child at the door every morning, asking how they are. Some days, a child just needs to be seen. When they know you care, they will try harder in class.

Nomusa, an Intermediate Phase teacher, reflected on how she adapted her pedagogy:

> There was a learner who always slept in class. At first, I was frustrated. But then I spoke to her grandmother and discovered she walks eight kilometres to school every day, leaving home at 4 am because she must first fetch water. After that, I stopped punishing her and started letting her rest for 15 minutes when she arrives. Then I give her extra attention during breaks. Her work improved because she felt understood, not judged.

Learner Perspectives

Learners consistently identified caring teachers as the primary reason they continued attending school despite hardships.

Nokuthula (age 13, Grade 6) wrote in her reflection:

> When my teacher listens to me and helps me without shouting, it really changes how I feel about learning. At home, things are not easy, and sometimes I come to school feeling worried and tired. However, when my teacher is patient and takes time to understand what I am going through, it makes me feel supported and safe. It gives me the confidence to try again, even when I have made mistakes or when the work feels difficult. Knowing that my teacher cares and does not get upset with me easily, it makes school like a place where I stay, start over, and keep pushing forward, no matter what challenge I am facing, even outside of school.

Sabelo (age 14, Grade 7) shared in an FGD:

> Last year, my mother was very sick and I had to take care of my younger siblings. I missed many days of school. When I came back, I expected the teacher to be angry. But Teacher Bongani just said, “I'm glad you're back. Let's see how we can catch up.” He gave me extra worksheets and let me work with a friend. That made me want to prove that I could still pass. If he had shouted at me, I think I would have just given up.

Community Stakeholder Perspectives

Nomvula, the social worker, observed:

> What I see in these schools is that teachers are doing more than teaching. They are acting as social workers, counsellors, and sometimes parents. This is not in their job description, but they do it because they see the need. When teachers create that caring environment, children open up. I have had teachers refer children to me who were experiencing abuse, something the child never told anyone before. That only happens when there is trust.

Theoretical Interpretation

These empirical findings align directly with Noddings' (2012) assertion that care in education transcends academic instruction; it involves attentiveness, empathy, and responsiveness that affirm learners' dignity. In vulnerable contexts, such affective care mitigates the psychosocial effects of poverty, stigma, and trauma, enabling learners to persist in schooling (Botha & van Niekerk, 2022; Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2023).

The teachers who participated in the study perceived caring pedagogy as a transformative act, not merely a moral obligation, but also as a strategy for promoting equity and inclusion. They implemented small but meaningful practices: flexible deadlines for learners with caregiving responsibilities, counselling circles after traumatic events, and inclusive classroom discussions. These practices exemplify what Beyers (2022) termed transformative care, where authentic care involves challenging structural inequalities and fostering learner agency.

From a social-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Ungar, 2019), these caring relationships operate at the microsystem level, serving as proximal processes that directly influence learner development. The emergence of youth-centric social ecologies, informal learning hubs, and peer mentorship circles reinforced caring relationships beyond the classroom. These hubs, often situated in school halls or community centres, became spaces for homework clubs, emotional support, and life skills training. In these ecologies, care was distributed rather than individualised; it flowed through networks of teachers, peers, and community stakeholders.

This finding resonates with the collective resilience model proposed by Theron (2021), which posits that resilience in resource-constrained contexts is sustained when care and support are shared across interconnected systems. It also mirrors the UNESCO (2020) call for schools to serve as community anchors for sustainable development, integrating educational, emotional, and social resources in a single ecosystem. In short, creating youth-centric and caring ecologies transforms schools into sustainable ecosystems of learning" (Mhlongo & Walton, 2021). Such environments foster emotional safety, belonging, and mutual accountability, the psychosocial preconditions for sustained educational engagement and well-being.

Theme 2: Expanding Local Economic and Educational Opportunities

Empirical Findings

A second theme related to the importance of linking learning with livelihood and local opportunity. Participants argued that sustainable learning cannot exist in isolation from the economic realities of learners' communities.

Teacher Perspectives

Sipho, a teacher and coordinator of the school garden project, explained:

> We realised that many learners were disengaged because they didn't see the point of education. Their parents are unemployed, older siblings are unemployed after finishing school. They think, “Why should I study if there are no jobs?” So, we had to show them that education can help them create opportunities, not just wait for jobs.

Bongani added:

> The vegetable garden started as a way to supplement the feeding scheme. But then we thought, “Why not teach the children how to run it as a small business?” Now our Grade 7 learners manage the garden. They keep records, calculate profits, and sell vegetables to the community. They are learning mathematics, entrepreneurship, and responsibility—all while contributing to the school.

Learner Perspectives

Zinhle (age 13, Grade 7) wrote in her reflection:

> When we as learners begin to understand that what we learn at school can actually help us survive and build better lives right here in our own village, our whole attitude towards education changes. We stop thinking that education is something that only matters in big towns or cities, or that its benefits are meant for people who live far away from urban areas. Instead, we start to realise that what we learn can help us improve our own community, support our families, and create opportunities without having to leave home. This makes learning feel more relevant and meaningful because it connects directly to the challenges and possibilities we encounter every day in the village.

Mandla (age 14, Grade 7) shared in an FGD:

> I used to think I would have to go to Johannesburg to find work. But now, through our garden project, I see that I can grow things and sell them here. I'm learning how to calculate profit, how to save money, how to work in a team. Even if I don't go to university, these skills will help me. It makes me want to stay in school because I'm learning things I can actually use.

Community Stakeholder Perspectives

Siphiwe, the youth leader, observed:

> What excites me is that the children are now teaching their parents. One parent came to me and said her daughter taught her how to budget using the profits from selling eggs. Another parent said her son showed her how to keep simple records for their spaza shop. The learning is going both ways.

Gladys, the nurse, noted the health implications:

> The garden has improved nutrition. Children are eating vegetables at school, and some have started home gardens. When children are better nourished, they concentrate better and get sick less. This connects directly to their ability to learn.

Theoretical Interpretation

This pragmatic form of situated learning aligns with the ESD paradigm, which advocates for integrating local relevance, environmental stewardship, and social entrepreneurship into education (UNESCO, 2020). Such approaches enable learners to view their schooling as part of a broader continuum of sustainable livelihoods, rather than a narrow path to urban employment (Glover & Kusterer, 2016; Mahaye, 2024).

Moreover, exposure to local economic activities enhanced learners' self-perceived competence and sense of agency, both of which are central to the social-ecological understanding of resilience. By engaging in agricultural projects and micro-enterprise initiatives, learners developed tangible skills while fostering a mindset of adaptive innovation. These activities functioned as experiential learning platforms that strengthened problem-solving, collaboration, and self-efficacy—core components of resilience (Ungar, 2021).

This finding aligns with the argument by Mukonza and Nkuna (2022) that resilience-building in African education should be coupled with localised sustainability practices, enabling learners to respond creatively to environmental and economic disruptions. Similarly, Rieckmann (2018) emphasised that sustainable education requires competencies such as critical thinking, responsibility, and collaboration, all of which were nurtured in these community-linked projects.

From an ecological systems perspective, these initiatives strengthened the mesosystem by creating meaningful connections between school learning and community life (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Learners experienced continuity between what they learned in school and what mattered in their daily lives, enhancing the relevance and retention of both academic and practical skills.

In essence, expanding local educational and economic opportunities transforms vulnerability into potential. It redefines learning as an act of place-based empowerment, anchoring education within community development and ensuring that resilience contributes not just to individual survival but to collective sustainability.

Theme 3: Building Healthy Networks and Relational Capital for Sustainability

Empirical Findings

The third central theme underscored the role of social networks and relational capital in sustaining resilience among vulnerable learners. Across all participant groups, relationships were consistently identified as both a protective resource and a catalyst for learning.

Learner Perspectives

Learners described how supportive friendships and peer study groups helped them manage academic and emotional pressures.

Zinhle wrote in her reflection:

> My friends and I have created our own rule to help each other stay strong. Whenever one of us feels overwhelmed or feels like giving up—whether it is with schoolwork, problems at home, or just feeling tired—the rest of us step in to remind her why she started in the first place. We discuss her goals, dreams, and the progress she has already achieved. In this way, we encourage one another and ensure that no one is left to struggle alone. This support system we have built helps us keep going, even on the days when things feel too heavy. It is our way of lifting each other and making sure we all stay focused and motivated in our schoolwork.

Sabelo shared in an FGD:

> Before this project, I kept my problems to myself. I thought asking for help meant I was weak. But when we started the peer mentoring programme, I was paired with an older learner who had been through similar things. He showed me that it's okay to talk. Now I have three friends I can go to when I'm struggling. We help each other with homework, but we also just listen.

Teacher Perspectives

Thandi observed changes in classroom dynamics:

> I've noticed that learners are now more willing to help each other. Before, they competed. Now they collaborate. When one learner finishes their work, they automatically go to help someone who is struggling. This was not something we taught explicitly—it emerged from the culture we built.

Nomusa noted the role of technology in expanding networks:

> Some of our learners now have access to smartphones through a community initiative. They created a WhatsApp group for homework help. Even when schools are closed, they are still learning and supporting each other. This is something we never had before.

Community Stakeholder Perspectives

Jabulani, the police officer, described the impact on youth at risk:

> I work with young boys who are vulnerable to gang involvement. Through this project, we connected some of them with positive role models in the community—men who have stable jobs, who are involved in their churches, who can show them a different path. When boys see that there are adults who care about them, who will show up for them consistently, it changes how they see themselves and their future.

Nomvula, the social worker, emphasised the importance of intergenerational ties:

> What makes this community special is that older people still play a role in raising children. Even if parents are absent, there is a grandmother, a neighbour, a church member who steps in. In this project, we formalised some of that through the mentorship programme. But the foundation was

> already there—this community has always practised collective child-rearing. We just strengthened what already existed.

Siphiwe, the youth leader, added:

> The networks we built through this project are not just for now. Teachers now have each other's numbers; they know who to call when a child needs help. The social worker knows the teachers personally, so referrals happen faster. The nurse comes to the school regularly now, not just when called. We have created systems that will continue after the project ends.

Theoretical Interpretation

Such accounts illustrate the peer-based dimension of resilience, where social belonging serves as a buffer against stress and promotes persistence (Theron & Liebenberg, 2023). Teachers and community participants echoed this, noting that mentorship and intergenerational ties between youth and adults created a web of accountability that extended beyond the classroom.

The study found that technological connectivity also expanded these networks. With improved internet access through local initiatives, learners began engaging in online study forums, career mentorship groups, and virtual peer exchanges. This digital engagement enhanced learners' exposure to diverse perspectives and resources, aligning with Twum-Antwi et al.'s (2020) assertion that access to social and informational networks strengthens adaptive capacities in youth.

However, participants also cautioned that digital inclusion must be equitable and supported by digital literacy training. Without this, technology risks reinforcing existing inequalities. This aligns with recent research by Mlambo and Mhlongo (2023), who argued that digital resilience, the capacity to use technology safely and productively, is increasingly integral to educational sustainability in South Africa's rural areas.

Relational capital extended beyond peers and technology. Teachers, parents, and local leaders collaboratively built intersectoral support networks that addressed learners' holistic needs, encompassing mental health, nutrition, safety, and mentorship. This collaboration embodied the social-ecological theory's mesosystemic interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), illustrating how connections between schools, families, and communities enhance the resilience of both individuals and systems.

These networks were not merely reactive safety nets but proactive systems of care and opportunity. For example, retired educators volunteered to provide extra tutoring sessions; local nurses offered health talks; police officers mentored young boys vulnerable to gang involvement. Such community-based initiatives resonate with international findings that resilience is co-constructed through cross-sectoral partnerships (Ungar, 2021; World Health Organization, 2021).

In this sense, relational capital functioned as the infrastructure of sustainable learning, a network of shared care, accountability, and hope. The strength of these connections determined the community's capacity to withstand adversity and adaptively respond to emerging challenges such as climate stress, technological disruption, and social change (McGuire et al., 2020; Theron, 2021).

Interpreting the Findings: Toward Transformative Resilience

Synthesising the above themes (see summary in Table 1) reveals a model of transformative resilience that goes beyond coping with adversity to reshaping the social and educational structures that produce it. Within this model, sustainable learning for vulnerable learners emerges from the interaction of three interdependent systems:

- Relational systems (care and connection).

- Structural systems (economic and educational opportunity).
- Ecological systems (community and environmental sustainability).

This integrated model extends the traditional notion of resilience, which focuses on individual persistence, to a systemic and collective process of adaptation and transformation (Theron & Donald, 2023; Ungar, 2021). The findings affirm that resilience-building initiatives must simultaneously address psychosocial, pedagogical, and socioeconomic dimensions.

Table 1

Summary of Themes

Theme	Key Empirical Findings	Evidence Sources	Theoretical Alignment
Creating youth-centric and caring learning ecologies	Teachers adapted pedagogy to show care; learners reported increased motivation when feeling supported; community stakeholders observed trust-based referrals	Teacher interviews (Thandi, Nomusa); Learner reflections (Nokuthula); FGDs (Sabelo); Social worker interview (Nomvula)	Ethics of Care (Noddings, 2012); Transformative Care (Beyers, 2022); Microsystem processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1994)
Expanding local economic and educational opportunities	School garden project integrated entrepreneurship; learners developed practical skills; community members observed knowledge transfer	Teacher interviews (Sipho, Bongani); Learner reflections (Zinhle); FGDs (Mandla); Youth leader interview (Siphiwe)	ESD (UNESCO, 2020); Situated learning (Rieckmann, 2018); Mesosystem connections (Bronfenbrenner, 1994)
Building healthy networks and relational capital	Peer support groups emerged organically; intergenerational mentorship established; intersectoral collaboration strengthened	Learner reflections (Zinhle); FGDs (Sabelo); Police officer interview (Jabulani); Social worker interview (Nomvula)	Collective resilience (Theron, 2021); Social-ecological model (Ungar, 2019); Digital resilience (Mlambo & Mhlongo, 2023)

Furthermore, the study confirms the synergy between resilience and ESD. When learning environments embed values of collaboration, equity, and ecological consciousness, they cultivate not only competent learners but active sustainability citizens (UNESCO, 2020). In this regard, resilience functions as both a means and an outcome of sustainable education—a dynamic process that strengthens learners' capacity to thrive while contributing to the resilience of their communities.

Importantly, the participatory nature of this research enabled these findings to emerge from the community's own understandings and priorities. The PAR process itself contributed to building the relational capital described in Theme 3, as co-researchers developed trust and collaborative relationships through their work together. This methodological insight reinforces the substantive finding that resilience is not delivered to communities but co-constructed with them.

Ultimately, the Building Resilience for Sustainable Learning project illustrates that vulnerability is not destiny. Through caring ecologies, contextually grounded learning opportunities, and strong relational networks, rural schools can become sites of transformation—not merely spaces of survival, but ecosystems of sustainable growth.

Conclusion and Implications

This study has examined how resilience can be intentionally cultivated to promote sustainable learning among vulnerable learners in South African schools. Drawing on the case study of the Building Resilience for Sustainable Learning project in rural KwaZulu-Natal, the findings reaffirm that resilience is not merely an individual trait but a dynamic and relational process embedded within social, cultural, and institutional systems. By foregrounding the experiences of learners, educators, and community members, this research highlights the crucial role of contextually grounded, caring, and participatory educational ecologies in fostering the psychosocial competence and academic engagement of vulnerable learners.

At its core, the study demonstrates that resilience and sustainability are mutually reinforcing. Schools that nurture relational care, provide meaningful learning linked to local opportunity, and facilitate cross-sectoral collaboration build both the capacity to adapt and the capacity to endure. Resilience, in this sense, is transformative; it equips learners and communities not only to survive adversity but also to co-create new pathways of possibility. The findings thus expand existing understandings of resilience by situating it within the socio-ecological and ethical frameworks of care, equity, and sustainability (Theron & Donald, 2023; UNESCO, 2020; Ungar, 2021).

Educational Implications

The implications for educational practice are multifaceted. First, the findings call for a paradigm shift from deficit-focused to strength-based pedagogies. Rather than pathologising vulnerability, educators should identify and build upon learners' existing competencies, cultural assets, and community knowledge. Integrating life skills education, social and emotional learning, and ESD into the curriculum can help learners cultivate adaptive capacities such as self-regulation, collaboration, and problem-solving (Naudé & Meier, 2021; UNESCO, 2020).

Second, teacher education programmes should include explicit training in trauma-informed and caring pedagogies, preparing educators to respond empathetically to the psychosocial realities of learners in under-resourced contexts (Beyers, 2022; Mampane, 2020). Teachers who understand the relational dimensions of learning are better positioned to create inclusive classrooms where learners feel safe, valued, and capable of growth. As this study revealed, consistent yet straightforward acts of care, such as listening, validating emotions, and maintaining flexible expectations, significantly enhance learners' motivation and resilience.

Third, schools should institutionalise peer-support and mentorship programmes, capitalising on the power of relational networks to sustain learner engagement. Structured peer tutoring, student leadership initiatives, and intergenerational mentoring can provide psychosocial scaffolding that extends learning beyond the classroom (Theron & Liebenberg, 2023). These networks, both face-to-face and digital, serve as vital social capital that reinforces a sense of belonging and resilience, particularly for learners navigating poverty, disability, or family instability.

Policy Implications

At policy level, the findings highlight the need for integrated, multi-sectoral approaches to supporting vulnerable learners. Education policy must align with social development, health, and community-based initiatives to address the structural roots of vulnerability such as food insecurity, gender inequality, and mental health stigma. The DBE's (2014) *Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support* provides a foundation for such collaboration; however, implementation requires sustained capacity-building, resource allocation, and community engagement.

Policies should also prioritise contextual flexibility; rural and township schools must have autonomy to design locally relevant interventions that draw on Indigenous knowledge systems, community partnerships, and environmental sustainability practices (Mukonza & Nkuna, 2022). National and provincial education frameworks should therefore recognise resilience-building not as an "add-on" programme but as a core educational outcome linked to learner well-being, academic achievement, and long-term social sustainability.

Furthermore, in the wake of technological disruption and climate uncertainty, educational policy should promote digital and ecological resilience. Access to affordable internet, digital literacy, and green learning environments must be considered essential components of equitable education (Mahaye, 2024; Mlambo & Mhlongo, 2023). These investments ensure that learners not only survive systemic shocks but also acquire the skills to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Research Implications

From a research perspective, this study underscores the value of participatory and context-sensitive methodologies. The combination of focus group dialogues and reflective writing enabled authentic expressions of voice, emotion, and agency-dimensions that are often absent in quantitative studies of resilience. Future research should continue to prioritise learner-centred and community-engaged approaches, exploring how resilience is locally conceptualised and enacted within diverse South African contexts.

There is also a need for longitudinal studies examining how school-based resilience initiatives influence learners' life trajectories, employability, and community participation over time. Additionally, comparative studies across provinces and between rural and urban schools could reveal how socioeconomic and cultural factors shape resilience processes differently. Ultimately, interdisciplinary research that integrates psychology, education, and sustainability science would deepen our understanding of how psychosocial competence interacts with ecological and systemic resilience.

Practical Applications for Educators

Based on the findings, educators can implement concrete strategies in their classrooms and schools as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2
Strategies for Educators

Strategy	Description	Example from Study
Morning greetings	Greet each learner individually at the door; ask a personal question	Thandi's practice of checking in with learners daily
Flexible deadlines	Allow extensions for learners with caregiving responsibilities or long walks to school	Nomusa's accommodation for learners who arrive tired
Peer mentoring	Pair older learners with younger ones for academic and emotional support	Sabelo's experience with peer mentoring

Community-connected projects	Link curriculum to local economic activities (gardening, small business)	School vegetable garden with entrepreneurial component
Counselling circles	Create safe spaces for learners to share feelings after difficult events	Teacher-facilitated group discussions after community trauma
Parent/community involvement	Invite community members to share skills and mentor learners	Retired educators tutoring; police officer mentoring boys

Policy Implementation Recommendations

For policymakers at district, provincial, and national levels, the following actionable steps are recommended:

- Integrate resilience indicators into school monitoring frameworks alongside academic performance metrics.
- Allocate dedicated funding for school-based psychosocial support including counsellors, social workers, and nurse visits.
- Mandate trauma-informed practice training in all teacher professional development programmes.
- Establish intersectoral referral protocols between DBE, Department of Social Development, and Department of Health.
- Support school-community partnership models through small grants and recognition programmes.
- Invest in digital infrastructure for rural schools including devices, connectivity, and digital literacy training.
- Review curriculum to explicitly include resilience competencies (self-awareness, emotional regulation, problem-solving) across subjects.

Concluding Reflections

In conclusion, this study affirms that building resilience for sustainable learning is not a peripheral concern but a central educational imperative in South Africa's journey toward equity and social justice. Vulnerable learners, far from being passive recipients of aid, are active agents of change when supported through caring, connected, and opportunity-rich learning ecologies. By embedding resilience within the broader pursuit of sustainability, educators and policymakers can transform schools into living ecosystems of hope, where learners not only recover from adversity but also cultivate the skills, values, and relationships necessary to shape a more just and sustainable society.

As the Building Resilience for Sustainable Learning project demonstrates, sustainable education begins with the conviction that every learner, regardless of circumstance, possesses the capacity to thrive. The task of the education system, therefore, is to nurture that capacity patiently, contextually, and collectively until resilience becomes not an exception, but the norm of learning in South Africa's schools.

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Female Principals' Servant Leadership Experiences and Quality Education in Low Socioeconomic Contexts in South Africa: Through a Feminist Theory Lens[7]

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Abstract

This paper reports on the servant leadership practices of female school principals and how these practices improved the quality of education in rural schools in South Africa. Using a feminist theoretical lens, the researcher explored how female principals conceptualised and enacted servant leadership in under-resourced school contexts, and how this leadership approach promoted educational quality despite systemic and gendered constraints. The research was exploratory and interpretative in nature, drawing on qualitative interviews with six female principals and six female teachers across three provinces in South Africa. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The findings revealed several key themes: servant leadership as a moral and spiritual calling; relationships as the foundation of leadership; collective leadership and shared vision; holistic development of learners; motivation through empathy and staff development; and balancing accountability with a servant ethos. The study suggests that servant leadership, grounded in feminist praxis, offers a viable framework for educational transformation from the perspective of female principals. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on gendered leadership and carry important implications for educational policy and school governance reform.

Key words: female leadership, servant leadership, feminist theory, quality education, low socioeconomic schools

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Introduction

South Africa's democratic dispensation places strong emphasis on the importance of inclusive and equitable education. The South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996b), together with the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996a), lay the foundation for participatory and democratic governance in schools, highlighting the critical role of school leadership in driving educational change. Within this framework, school leaders are expected to ensure that all learners, including those in rural areas, have access to quality and equitable education. This requires principals to not only implement national education policies but also to lead their schools in ways that promote social justice and expand educational opportunities for historically disadvantaged communities.

School leadership goes beyond just managing instruction; it also involves creating supportive environments that improve educational quality, build strong relationships with communities, and enhance teacher retention (Naidoo & Perumal, 2014). The leadership styles adopted by principals, and how these styles are perceived by teachers and learners, significantly influence the school climate and educational outcomes. Research shows that participatory leadership practices promote collaboration among teachers, enhance morale, and improve teaching and learning (Bush, 2007; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). As a result, effective leadership plays a vital role in fostering positive organisational cultures that support learner achievement and lead to sustainable improvements in schools.

Within this broader discourse on educational leadership, there has been a growing focus on the leadership styles of women in schools. Research indicates that female principals often embrace relational, collaborative, and care-focused leadership methods that resonate with the ideals of servant leadership. For instance, Schmidt and Mestry (2015) discovered that female principals tend to foster strong connections with their school communities through supportive and empathetic leadership. Likewise, Zitha (2022) illustrated how female school leaders address structural and cultural challenges while using collaborative techniques to steer their schools. Additionally, Williams and Perumal (2021) highlighted how female principals blend care, advocacy, and resistance to foster transformative educational settings.

However, the landscape of school leadership in rural South Africa is rather complex. Schools in these contexts often function under difficult circumstances marked by scarce resources, high teacher turnover, and systemic inequalities that compromise educational quality. For female principals, these challenges are compounded by institutional gender discrimination, entrenched patriarchal norms, and administrative pressures that can limit their professional influence and leadership effectiveness (Pagayon et al.,2025). These difficulties are further exacerbated by the wider socioeconomic factors that influence education in rural communities. Research further reveals that patriarchal norms still impact how leadership authority is perceived, often leading to female principals being viewed as less legitimate than their male peers (Ndebele, 2018). Recent studies emphasise that female leaders must contend with various forms of marginalisation related to gender, organisational culture, and societal expectations while managing demanding leadership roles (Pietersen et al., 2025).

Even though the number of women in school leadership roles has risen, existing literature frequently either highlights the challenges women encounter or examines the leadership styles they adopt, treating these elements as separate issues. As a result, the relationship between gendered leadership practices and structural inequalities in rural education remains underexplored. Recent research has shown that female principals exhibit resilience and adaptive leadership strategies as they respond to gendered expectations and systemic limitations in rural schools (Nhlumayo, 2025). However, there has been limited empirical focus on how these practices impact school development, teacher commitment, and educational outcomes.

Another limitation in the existing literature is the lack of theoretical exploration regarding leadership styles that focus on service, relationships, and ethical responsibility in education. Servant leadership emphasises the importance of leaders who are dedicated to supporting others, encouraging collaboration, and

prioritising the well-being and growth of both teachers and students. Research suggests that implementing servant leadership practices can enhance teacher morale, increase professional commitment, and improve school effectiveness by fostering supportive organisational environments (Makirimani & Naicker, 2025). Additionally, studies in rural South African schools indicate that strategies like community involvement, building a shared vision, and providing teacher support play a significant role in promoting educational resilience and improving quality in resource-limited settings (Shula & Heystek, 2025).

However, despite these findings, the relationship between female leadership, servant leadership practices, and the quest for quality education in rural schools is still not well understood. Much of the research has concentrated on issues of identity, representation, or gender-related challenges, with insufficient focus on how the leadership practices of female principals can lead to improvements in school climate, teacher motivation, and the overall teaching and learning experience. To address this gap, the current study utilises feminist theory to explore how female principals implement servant leadership in rural South African schools and how these practices can enhance the quality of education in low socioeconomic environments.

Background

Gender inequalities in leadership continue to impact opportunities for women in various professional fields, including education. Rincón et al. (2017) examined various barriers that prevent women from moving into leadership roles. These barriers, which are often structural and cultural, stop women from reaching senior positions even when they have the right qualifications and experience. In educational leadership, these challenges are particularly evident in school management systems, where women often find it difficult to secure principalships and other high-level roles. Babic and Hansez (2021) highlighted that the glass ceiling is a significant factor contributing to gender inequality because it limits women's advancement into leadership roles.

Invisible barriers can restrict recognition and career advancement, leading female leaders to experience lower confidence, self-esteem, and feelings of dissatisfaction when their contributions go unrecognised (Khumalo, 2021). This challenge is especially pronounced in teaching, a field predominantly occupied by women, yet the leadership roles remain largely male-dominated with limited research on women's leadership styles (Pillay, 2025). In South Africa, female school leaders confront both structural and cultural challenges including gendered expectations of authority. Many feel compelled to adopt traditionally masculine traits in order to be accepted, which can hinder their ability to express authentic leadership; their contributions are also often undervalued compared to their male counterparts (Nehemia & Lenkoe, 2023).

Historical and societal norms reinforce the notion that leadership is largely a male domain. Lumby and Azaola (2014) pointed out that gender stereotypes continue to influence perceptions of leadership suitability, often leading to the assumption that men are inherently better suited for these roles. Women who aspire to leadership positions face increased scrutiny, and their actions are frequently judged through a gendered lens (Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Against this bedrock, this study investigates the servant leadership practices of female principals in rural South African schools operating in low socioeconomic conditions. By focusing on their personal experiences, leadership strategies, and methods, the research examines how these principals overcome structural and gender-related challenges to improve educational quality. Using feminist theory as a framework, the study emphasises how relational and service-oriented leadership practices contribute to teaching, learning, and school development—even in the face of limited resources and gender biases.

Literature Review

Educational management and leadership involve the strategies and practices that steer schools toward achieving academic excellence, effective administration, and fostering a positive organisational culture (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Good leadership in education goes beyond just managing resources and ensuring compliance with policies; it's about creating environments where teachers, students, and communities can thrive (Bush, 2007). Key elements of this approach include setting a clear vision, making ethical decisions, and promoting collaboration, recognising that schools are complex social systems influenced by cultural, structural, and societal factors (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2020).

In rural South Africa, where schools often struggle with limited resources, socioeconomic challenges, and systemic inequalities, the role of educational leaders becomes even more crucial (Memela & Ramrathan, 2022). Principals serve not just as administrators but also as moral and social leaders who can significantly impact teacher motivation, student success, and community involvement (Bush, 2011). Leadership styles that emphasise building relationships, empowering others, and encouraging participatory governance are vital because they tackle both educational quality and social inequalities (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010).

Within this context, servant leadership stands out as a particularly relevant and supportive model. It aligns well with the main goals of educational management and leadership by focusing on relational, ethical, and inclusive practices that benefit teachers, students, and communities. This approach translates core leadership values—like collaboration, care, and moral responsibility—into actionable steps that can transform school culture, improve learning outcomes, and advance social justice.

The main aim of this study is to investigate how female school principals in rural South African schools practise servant leadership, viewed through a feminist lens, and to assess the effects of these practices on the quality of education. By merging servant leadership theory with feminist insights, this research looks at how female principals operate in settings marked by scarce resources, systemic inequalities, and gender-related obstacles. It goes beyond the usual goals of enhancing performance or motivating teachers, proposing rather, that these leadership approaches can foster social change by altering power dynamics, redistributing authority, and reclaiming relational and ethical leadership styles that are often neglected in hierarchical structures.

Greenleaf (1977) first presented servant leadership as a model where the intention to serve comes before the desire to lead, highlighting that leaders should prioritise the needs of others. In the context of schools, this means concentrating on the well-being, development, and interests of teachers, students, and the community. Actions like empowerment, mentorship, active listening, and collaborative decision-making are not just administrative tactics; they serve as tools to transform institutional power. By nurturing relational authority and moral accountability, female principals can bring about change at both the micro (classroom and staff interactions) and meso (school-wide systems) levels, reshaping community dynamics, and challenging established hierarchies (Bhengu & Emanuel, 2022; Schmidt, & Mestry, (2015).

In rural South African schools, where issues like structural inequality, limited resources, and gender expectations converge, servant leadership emerges as a relevant and effective practice. It boosts teacher motivation, creates a positive school environment, and enhances student performance (Shula, 2023). More than just these immediate advantages, servant leadership reshapes the social dynamics within schools by fostering trust, solidarity, and a sense of collective agency. The power dynamic shifts from a traditional top-down model to a more relational, collaborative, and ethically sound approach, achieved through shared decision-making, community engagement, moral advocacy, and empowering teachers, which in turn builds resilience and adaptability in resource-challenged settings (Kainde & Mandagi, 2023).

Recent studies show that female principals frequently exemplify servant leadership as both a moral and political approach, especially in under-resourced and patriarchal contexts. These leaders prioritise care, inclusion, and accountability over mere management techniques, often overcoming cultural and structural

obstacles to reach shared objectives (Albeshir, 2024; Jang & Alexander, 2022). This method redefines social power by positioning principals as ethical leaders who can confront oppressive norms while meeting the needs of students and their communities. In schools with scarce resources, a relational and empathetic leadership style enables principals to address social and emotional needs without sacrificing educational quality (Bush, 2011).

Servant leadership plays a crucial role in fostering intersectional resistance. For instance, Jang and Alexander (2022) pointed out that Black female principals in the United States employ relational leadership to address issues of racism and sexism, advocating for the needs of marginalised students. In a similar vein, female principals in South Africa utilise servant leadership to navigate patriarchal and hierarchical structures, thereby promoting inclusive and participatory governance. By focusing on improvisation, collaboration, and collective decision-making, these leaders strengthen institutional resilience, highlighting how servant leadership can serve as a grassroots mechanism for social change in inequitable educational environments (Bahrami, 2025).

Feminist leadership theory further illuminates how gender and context influence leadership experiences. By incorporating a feminist ethic of care into school practices, female principals can redistribute power, challenge existing norms, and foster equity, solidarity, and moral accountability. These changes manifest on various levels: interpersonal (relationships between teachers and principals), organisational (the overall school climate and decision-making processes), and community (interactions between schools and their communities). Thus, social change encompasses ethical, relational, and culturally responsive aspects (Bhengu & Emanuel, 2022; Dyantyi, 2025). Through this approach, servant leadership emerges as a potent force for both educational and social transformation.

While servant leadership has great potential to drive change, it also comes with its own set of limitations. Its emphasis on care, relational authority, and ethical responsibility might unintentionally reinforce traditional gender roles that suggest women should be nurturing and selfless, which can perpetuate patriarchal norms (Bush, 2020). Moreover, relying on moral authority instead of formal institutional power may limit the scope for broader structural reforms, leaving systemic inequities unaddressed. Therefore, servant leadership by itself cannot dismantle deep-rooted hierarchies or fully redistribute institutional power; achieving systemic change necessitates a blend of relational leadership and institutional reform.

In summary, the example of servant leadership in rural South African schools shows how female principals utilise relational, ethical, and participatory practices to promote transformative social change. By redefining power dynamics, redistributing authority, and adopting a feminist ethic of care, these leaders enhance educational quality while advocating for equity and social justice. However, to achieve meaningful systemic change, it is essential to combine servant leadership with broader structural strategies, providing a more nuanced understanding of how leadership can serve as both a tool for care and a means for social transformation in complex educational environments.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Theory Perspective

This study employs feminist theory to critically examine how female principals in rural South African schools practise servant leadership and what that means for the quality of education. Unlike simple descriptions of gendered leadership, a feminist perspective digs deeper into issues of power, authority, and structural inequality within educational systems. Feminist theory suggests that schools are social institutions, which exist within larger patriarchal frameworks where cultural norms, historical practices, and institutional hierarchies tend to favour men. In these environments, leadership authority is often justified by positional power, which emphasises traits typically associated with masculinity—like assertiveness, hierarchy, and competition—while downplaying the relational and care-oriented leadership styles often linked to women (Hartmann, 2003; Khoza, 2024).

Within this context, servant leadership presents a relational and ethical alternative. Greenleaf (1977) described servant leadership as a philosophy where the leader's main aim is to serve others, focusing on their growth, well-being, and most pressing needs. Viewed through a feminist lens, servant leadership transcends mere ethical or managerial practices to become a form of resistance against patriarchal educational systems. It questions the conventional power dynamics by shifting authority from positional dominance to relational and moral authority, thus redistributing influence among teachers, students, and the wider school community. This change is both structural and cultural because it alters school norms, decision-making processes, and even the definition of what true leadership looks like.

The implications of this synthesis for social change are profound. Servant leadership, shaped by feminist critique, operates on various levels. On a personal level, female principals employ empathy, active listening, and mentorship to empower teachers and amplify student voices, directly challenging traditional hierarchies that view leaders as the only decision-makers. At the organisational level, servant leadership promotes participatory governance and shared responsibility, allowing schools to operate in a more democratic and inclusive manner (Bahrami, 2025; Lomotey, 2019). In the community context, principals involve parents and local stakeholders, reclaiming education as a shared resource instead of a top-down system. These approaches collectively transform the concept of power: authority shifts from being singular and positional to being distributed, ethical, and relational, leading to significant social change in education.

Additionally, this framework redefines quality education not merely as a collection of performance metrics but as an issue of social justice. Schools guided by feminist-informed servant leadership emphasis equity, inclusion, and the empowerment of learners, addressing the structural inequalities that have historically marginalised certain groups. By centring care, collaboration, and accountability in their leadership, female principals work to break down barriers to opportunity and create educational environments where every learner can thrive. In this way, the quality of education is intertwined with the justice and fairness of school systems, rather than being narrowly measured by test scores or efficiency metrics (Eva et al., 2019; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

The feminist perspective sheds light on the transformative aspects of servant leadership. Female principals view care and relationships as not just nurturing but also as strategic and political actions. By fostering teacher development, creating inclusive environments, and advocating for marginalised students, they engage in a form of resistance against institutional norms. Through their relational authority, these leaders confront both overt and subtle patriarchal structures, adjusting school hierarchies while ensuring stability. This form of resistance is adaptive, arising from real-world challenges like limited resources, socioeconomic disparities, and systemic gender biases that compel leaders to demonstrate ethical judgment and improvisational skills (Albeshir, 2024; Jang & Alexander, 2022).

However, while feminist-informed servant leadership is a significant avenue for social change, it has its drawbacks. Emphasising care and relational authority can unintentionally reinforce gendered expectations that women should always be nurturing and selfless, which can perpetuate certain patriarchal norms. Moreover, by prioritising ethical influence over structural challenges, servant leadership might enhance local school conditions without addressing broader institutional inequalities, such as biases in national education policies or the systemic underfunding of rural schools (Nhlumayo & Ngubane, 2025). Therefore, while servant leadership embodies both care and resistance, it is not enough on its own to dismantle deep-rooted patriarchy; it needs to be paired with structural reforms, advocacy, and policy changes.

In conclusion, combining feminist theory with servant leadership offers a solid framework for understanding how female principals drive social change in rural schools. It views leadership as a relational, moral, and resistance-focused practice, emphasising the roles of care, empathy, and shared authority in transforming school cultures, redistributing power, and promoting educational equity. By framing quality education as a social justice issue rather than just a performance metric, this approach positions female principals not just as school administrators but as key players in systemic change, tackling structural inequalities, reclaiming relational authority, and creating inclusive, equitable learning environments.

Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study approach within a constructivist framework to investigate the servant leadership practices of female principals in high-performing rural schools located in low-income communities of South Africa. Constructivism suggests that knowledge is created collaboratively between the researcher and participants, with meaning being shaped by social, cultural, and contextual factors (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This method was particularly effective for understanding how female school leaders interpret and implement servant leadership in environments marked by limited resources, patriarchal norms, and systemic inequalities, while also emphasising the importance of education quality as a matter of social justice rather than just performance metrics. The multiple case study design allowed for a comparative analysis across six different rural schools, highlighting both common patterns and unique contextual details in leadership practices (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018).

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who had demonstrated effective leadership in challenging rural contexts. The criteria for inclusion required principals to: (a) lead rural schools serving low socioeconomic communities, (b) show evidence of school success through district rankings and consistent student performance on standardised tests, and (c) have a history of practising relational, people-centred leadership. Schools led by principals with less than three years of experience, those without clear evidence of school improvement, or those located in urban or semi-urban areas were excluded to keep the focus on leaders facing structural disadvantages. In each school, two participants were chosen: the principal and one teacher, resulting in a total of 12 participants. Including teachers allowed for a more comprehensive view by comparing the principals' self-reported practices with staff perceptions, thereby enhancing credibility, and providing a relational perspective on leadership (Stake, 1995).

In this study, performance is defined through a combination of quantitative and contextual indicators, including district rankings, standardised test scores over three years, and the schools' ability to sustain academic success despite limited resources. This approach recognises that performance is influenced by social factors, reflecting both student outcomes and the leaders' skills in overcoming structural challenges to learning. The research was conducted with an awareness of the researcher's background as an education professional familiar with rural schools. The researcher understood that his previous experiences with these schools and their leaders might introduce bias. To address this, he kept reflective field journals, engaged in member checking by sharing his initial interpretations with participants for their feedback, and used triangulation by incorporating perspectives from both principals and teachers. Feminist theory played a crucial role in guiding the analysis, ensuring that issues of power dynamics, gendered experiences, and systemic inequalities were central to understanding the findings, rather than simply attributing results to individual effort or technical leadership abilities (Alomair, 2015; Dyantyi, 2025).

The data collection process included semi-structured, in-person interviews that lasted about an hour each and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Observational notes were also taken to capture the school culture, interactions among participants, and the nuances of the context. By involving both principals and teachers, the study gained a deeper insight into the relational dynamics within the school and highlighted how servant leadership was both enacted and perceived.

For data analysis, the researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step thematic analysis method: getting familiar with the data, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and crafting the final narrative. Feminist theory guided the coding and theme development, focusing on the experiences of marginalisation, relational power, and resistance to patriarchal norms. The codes were refined iteratively to capture both individual and collective practices of

empowerment, relational authority, and community accountability. Any contradictions in the participants' narratives, like differing views on principal authority or teacher autonomy, were addressed through reflective discussions and comparisons across cases, ensuring that the analysis was sensitive to power imbalances and structural limitations.

From this analysis, six main themes emerged: (1) leadership as a moral and political calling; (2) relational and empathetic practices as forms of authority; (3) collective leadership and a shared vision; (4) holistic learner development as a measure of social justice; (5) staff motivation and professional development driven by care; and (6) navigating accountability within a servant leadership framework. These themes illustrate the connection between personal ethics, systemic challenges, and feminist-informed leadership strategies, showing how female principals in rural schools drive social change by reshaping institutional power, reclaiming relational authority, and creating equitable learning environments. This multiple case study, grounded in feminist theory, offers a thoughtful and critically aware perspective on how female rural principals use servant leadership not just as a style, but as a strategic and transformative approach to tackle gender inequalities and promote educational social justice.

To ensure trustworthiness in this study, the researcher employed several strategies that align with qualitative rigor and feminist principles. The researcher enhanced credibility by triangulating data from both principals and teachers, and we conducted member checking to confirm our interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher maintained reflexivity through reflective journals that documented our positionality and biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By providing a detailed description of the context, the researcher improved transferability, and kept an audit trail of transcripts, coding, and thematic development to ensure dependability. Peer debriefing and iterative analysis helped support confirmability, making sure that the findings truly reflected the experiences of participants rather than the researcher's own assumptions, ethically representing the voices of marginalised groups in rural schooling contexts (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995).

The North-West University Ethics Committee approved this study's ethical guidelines. Participants were provided with comprehensive information about the research's purpose, scope, and potential impacts, and they gave their written informed consent before any data was collected. To protect their privacy, pseudonyms were used for both participants and schools (P for principals, T for teachers), and all identifiable information was removed from transcripts and reports. The data were securely stored, with access limited to the researcher (British Educational Research Association, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following a feminist epistemological approach, the interview questions were designed to delve into issues of power, gender, and relationships in leadership. The coding and theme development aimed to amplify the voices of participants, emphasise their gendered experiences, and view leadership practices as opportunities for resistance and change. This method highlighted the relational and transformative aspects of servant leadership in under-resourced rural schools, ensuring that the findings accurately represented the lived experiences of participants within their challenging environments.

Findings

This section discusses the findings that emerged from the data. From the analysis, the following themes emerged: leadership as a moral and spiritual calling; relationships as the bedrock of leadership; collective leadership and a shared vision; holistic development of learners; motivation through empathy and staff development; and the challenge of balancing accountability with a servant ethos. These themes highlight how the participants understood servant leadership as both a practical and relational way of leading schools, emphasising the connection between personal values, professional duties, and the challenges they faced in their context. Based on the topic and aim of the study, the two predominant questions were: "How do these leaders practise servant leadership?" "How does it enhance the quality of education in their context through a feminist lens?"

The findings are organised in line with the six themes, creating a cohesive narrative that ties the participants' experiences to the research objectives. Each theme represents a unique aspect of servant leadership practice, shedding light on how female principals navigate leadership in under-resourced rural settings while promoting learner growth and staff involvement. The first research question explored how female principals understood and practised servant leadership in under-resourced school environments. It also sought to determine what values, behaviours, and practices they associated with servant leadership through care and service. The question also aimed to identify how their leadership was evolving to respond to environmental issues such as poverty, resource scarcity, and gendered norms.

Leadership as a Moral and Spiritual Calling

Female principals perceived their leadership role as a moral and spiritual calling. The participants did not describe leadership as a management task but rather as a calling grounded in care, service, and compassion, shaped by religious beliefs and contextual realities. P3 shared:

> My leadership is about being a father–mother figure to these kids. Most of them don't live with their parents, and some have never seen their fathers. That makes me feel like I've been called to fill that gap.

This calling extended beyond the scope of professional duty to encompass emotional labour and familial care, particularly in schools where poverty, trauma, and family breakdown were prevalent. Some of these participants described their schools as an extension of the family home. For example:

> I always say we are not just running schools; we are raising children. Implementing such initiatives requires more than just policies; it necessitates genuine emotional investment. (P1)

Teachers affirmed that their principals' leadership extended far beyond instruction. They emphasised how the care-driven ethos of female school leaders shaped the entire school climate. As T2 explained:

> Our principal treats each child like her own. It's not just discipline and books—she checks if they've eaten or if something's wrong at home.

Similarly, T1 remarked:

> There's heart in my principal's leadership. You feel it in how she speaks, how she comforts, and how she shows up every day, even when she's exhausted.

In the same vein, T8 noted:

> My principal doesn't see herself above anyone. She leads by walking with us, not over us. That builds trust and unity.

The servant leadership values embedded in the schools shaped this conceptualisation of leadership. Some participants referred to their faith as a source of direction and a means of coping with challenges:

> Being a principal here is hard, but I survive because I believe it's a mission. I was placed here by God for a specific purpose. (P5)

Others characterised leadership as a form of service that emulates the image of Jesus Christ, rejecting authoritative and dictatorial approaches in favour of humility and meekness. P2 highlighted:

> Jesus didn't rule from above. He served. That's the model I work based on. I'm here to walk with people, not over them.

Participants also positioned their roles as holistic caregivers to both staff and learners. As P4 noted:

> I'm not just here for the marks. I care if a child has eaten or if a teacher is overwhelmed. It means to lead with purpose.

The participants shared that their leadership stemmed from a deep connection with spiritual values and a strong sense of moral duty, even while navigating the challenges of working in under-resourced school environments. Their stories revealed that this calling gave them the strength to push through difficulties, influencing how they built trust, managed stress, and made decisions. This perspective aligns with African feminist views on leadership, which highlight the importance of ethical responsibility, being responsive to context, and prioritising collective well-being (Mama, 2001; Moorosi, 2021). Unlike traditional leadership models that focus on authority and control, the women leaders in this study regarded leadership as an act of care, justice, and service. By redefining power as something relational and restorative, they exemplified a more compassionate and inclusive style of leadership.

Crucially, this commitment to servant and care-oriented leadership also inspired teachers to become more engaged in their roles. Teachers noted that principals who treated students and staff with respect and kindness fostered a sense of unity and dedication, which, in turn, built trust and boosted morale. These relational leadership practices not only supported the well-being of both staff and students but also led to better teaching quality and a positive educational environment. Therefore, female leadership in schools with limited resources proves to be both transformative and empowering (Chabaya et al., 2009).

Relationships as the Foundation of Leadership

This theme sheds light on how female principals view relationships as a key part of their leadership identity and efforts to transform their schools. The participants stressed that leadership is fundamentally about relationships, where trust, empathy, and meaningful engagement with staff, students, and the local community are at the heart of their professional practice. In contexts where resources are scarce and formal support lacks, these relationships became crucial for keeping motivation high and promoting positive educational outcomes. P1 remarked:

> We're like a family here at this school . . . your worries are my worries. That's why teachers stick around, and students flourish.

Participants frequently described the leadership as familial, with principals leaning on strong relationships to keep their school thriving. P4 added:

> Building relationships fosters trust, and trust fuels commitment. That's the driving force behind our school.

They emphasised that trust was nurtured through genuine care shown through empathy, dependability, and being present. P2 pointed out:

> You can't achieve success without relationships. It's true in classrooms and staffrooms alike. Participants connected relational leadership to school success, noting that when resources were tight, emotional and social support became essential for motivating the team and managing effectively.

P3 highlighted:

> When people feel acknowledged and valued, they act differently. That's how we achieve results, even when we're short on resources.

Female teachers echoed this sentiment, sharing how ongoing care and support from their principals boosted their sense of belonging, commitment, and drive to enhance teaching quality:

> She knows our stories. When I faced personal challenges, she stepped in—not to judge, but to support. That's why I give my all here. (T1)

T2 added:

> We're not just employees to her—we're individuals. That kind of respect fosters loyalty and motivates us to work harder.

T3 noted:

> Even the little things, like greeting us by name and checking in on us, those gestures really count.

This relational approach also applied to students and their families. T4 observed:

> When students feel cared for, they engage more. The relationships we build with them, and their families change their perspective on school.

T5 emphasised:

> We make it a point to talk and listen. That time we invest builds the trust we need to function as a cohesive team.

These insights show that female principals really know how to use connection and care to create strong, resilient schools. Their style of feminist leadership is rooted in empathy, mutual accountability, and emotional strength rather than relying on top-down authority. This approach not only motivates teachers but also leads to better educational outcomes (Mama, 2001; Moorosi, 2021). In communities that face challenges, these relationships form the backbone of their leadership and help sustain their schools.

Collective Leadership and Shared Vision

This theme demonstrates that female principals approached leadership as a collaborative effort rooted in a shared sense of purpose and responsibility. Instead of seeing themselves as the sole decision-makers, the participants described leadership as a process that empowered staff to work together in making decisions, addressing challenges, and keeping the school running smoothly, even in tough times. P2 shared:

> I don't make decisions alone. We come together as a team, we discuss, and we figure out the best path forward together. That's how we create a sense of ownership.

The principals highlighted the importance of open dialogue and transparency in building trust, sparking innovation, encouraging initiative, and navigating the complexities of school environments. P4 also noted:

> People are more willing to try if they feel their voices matter. My job is to lead, yes, but also to listen and integrate their input.

Collective leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing staff well-being and fostering professional growth. When principals involve teachers in planning and decision-making, it creates a sense of value and belonging, particularly in environments where educators often feel overwhelmed. As P6 shared:

> We plan everything together—academic programmes, events, even discipline strategies. That's why people stay. They feel part of something bigger than their job.

P5 added:

> If I try to do this school by myself, it will collapse. We divide tasks, take turns, and help each other. That's our strength.

Teachers echoed these sentiments, noting increased commitment, motivation, and engagement in their instruction. Moreover, principals encouraged community involvement and collective reflection through peer feedback and regular debriefs, which helped to strengthen cohesion and promote continuous improvement. These practices highlight how female leadership, grounded in collaboration, equity, and a

shared vision, can enhance school resilience and the quality of education, even in the face of systemic and gendered challenges (Mama, 2001; Moorosi, 2021; Oplatka & Tamir, 2020).

The second research question aimed to delve into how female principals who practised servant leadership enhanced the quality of education, especially when faced with gender-related and structural challenges. It sought to uncover how their approach to servant leadership boosted teacher motivation, nurtured student well-being, and strengthened school resilience. Additionally, the question explored how these leaders navigated structural inequalities while fostering inclusive and effective school environments.

Holistic Development of Learners

Female principals focused on the overall development of their students rather than just their academic achievements. They measured success by looking at emotional well-being, social skills, and readiness for life, embodying a whole-child approach rooted in servant leadership and feminist principles that nurtured both intellect and emotion (Blackmore, 2013; Greenleaf, 1977). P1 shared:

> It's not only about grades. Emotional learning is crucial. Some of our kids arrive at school already dealing with trauma. You can't expect them to perform without showing care.

The principals stressed the importance of creating emotionally safe environments to foster communication and support. Issues like hunger, violence, and abuse were prevalent external factors that could obstruct learning, unless emotional needs were prioritised first. P6 remarked:

> Some students come here hungry, while others come from abusive situations. If we don't address those problems first, teaching won't be effective. We need to treat them as children, not just students.

Principals also highlighted the importance of social development to prepare students to be responsible citizens:

> Of course, academic outcomes matter, but we're also raising future adults, parents, leaders, and community members. That's why we focus on teaching them how to communicate, lead, and treat others with respect. (P2)

Their practices included life skills and leadership programmes, peer mentoring, and classroom discussions on resilience and self-esteem, highlighting how servant leadership creates a nurturing learning environment that boosts educational outcomes (Liden et al., 2008; Spears, 2010). These leaders emphasised holistic learning, even amid performance pressures. P5 shared:

> We're always being asked for results, results, results. But I constantly remind my team: the child comes first. If we only chase grades, we lose the essence of education.

This leadership approach values inclusive, learner-centred education over corporate-style performance metrics. By nurturing the whole child, the female principals illustrated how servant leadership not only supported learner development but also improved the quality of education in underprivileged settings (Blackmore, 2013; Greenleaf, 1977).

Motivation Through Empathy and Staff Development

This theme dives into how female principals harnessed empathy, emotional support, and professional development to inspire and retain teachers in challenging, resource-limited school settings. The participants consistently highlighted the significance of grasping teachers' personal and professional situations, asserting that motivation and performance were deeply intertwined with feeling acknowledged, supported, and valued. This perspective resonates with the principles of servant leadership, which focuses on caring for others, and the feminist ethic of care, which emphasises the

importance of human connections in educational leadership (Blackmore, 2013; Greenleaf, 1977). P2 shared:

> I don't just hand out tasks. I really get to know my teachers' challenges. That's what keeps them motivated. Some are single parents, and others commute long distances. If I ignore that, I risk losing them.

In challenging contexts marked by low pay and difficult conditions, these principals led with compassion, opting for understanding rather than punishment. P2 added:

> When you listen to your staff, it changes everything. If you overlook them, you'll lose them. Even a quick chat in the hallway can lift someone's spirits.

Teachers echoed the positive effects of this approach:

> When our principal checks in on us – not just about work, but how we're doing personally – it reminds me that I'm more than just an employee here. I feel valued as a person. (T3)

> She noticed when I was having a tough time, and instead of judging me, she helped lighten my workload. That simple act made me want to stay and give my all. (T2)

The principals also encouraged professional development by delegating tasks, recognising individual strengths, and creating leadership roles:

> One teacher was feeling stuck, disengaged, and frustrated. I crafted a new position for her that played to her strengths. She thrived and eventually got promoted to deputy at another school. (P3)

> I don't view myself as the sole leader. Everyone has something valuable to offer. I give teachers the freedom to lead, and that makes a real difference. (P4)

Supportive practices included giving regular feedback, keeping open-door policies, and celebrating achievements:

> We really affirm our teachers. That's how we build loyalty and get results. You can't just criticise—you have to celebrate the small wins too. (P6)

> These teachers work wonders with so little. I make it a point to let them know I see their efforts. My role is to shield them from burnout and help them believe in the impact of their work. (P5)

These insights show that servant leadership—which involves empathy, listening, and genuine care—boosts teacher motivation, resilience, and professional growth. Feminist leadership takes this a step further by being transformative, challenging traditional hierarchies, and nurturing a culture of care that supports learning, especially in failing systems (Liden et al., 2008; Spears, 2010).

Balancing Accountability With Servant Ethos

This theme highlights the journey of female principals as they undertake the tough balancing act of meeting bureaucratic accountability demands while embracing a servant leadership style rooted in care, relationships, and ethics. The participants shared the intricate professional and emotional challenges they faced while juggling district goals, union expectations, and community scrutiny without sacrificing their commitment to inclusive, human-centred leadership. As Setlhodi (2022) pointed out, female leaders in challenging school contexts show remarkable resilience by staying focused on the core aspects of their roles, even when they encounter unique obstacles and insufficient support. As P6 mentioned:

> We're overwhelmed, but our teamwork and shared vision keep us anchored. If we lose that, we lose the essence of our work.

The principals recognised the high-performance benchmarks set by education authorities, which include student outcomes, reporting obligations, and curriculum timelines. Yet they took proactive steps to protect their staff from undue stress by managing administrative duties and creating a nurturing work environment. P2 shared:

> We operate as if no one is watching, because it's all about integrity. You can't just chase numbers and overlook the people behind them.

These leaders skilfully balanced accountability with genuine care, meeting the demands of the system while ensuring their teams felt protected. They viewed responsibility as a moral obligation, not merely a set of rules to follow. Serving the system never took precedence over serving their people. P3 remarked:

> Sure, we answer to the department, but our real strength lies in our bond. That's what truly gets the work done.

Other principals shared how they shielded their staff from overwhelming demands, advocated for their needs in district meetings, and reinterpreted policies to uphold human dignity. P5 noted:

> Sometimes, I have to stand up against unrealistic deadlines. If I don't, my staff pays the price. I make sure to explain our situation and focus on what's achievable without burning anyone out.

Teachers echoed this sentiment, highlighting how principals served as a buffer against institutional pressures while still driving school success:

> Our principal takes on a lot of the administrative burden so we can concentrate on teaching. She fights for us in meetings. That kind of leadership inspires us to give our best. (T1)

> Even when things get chaotic, we never feel isolated. She ensures we're informed, prepared, and supported, which is a rarity in this system. (T2)

> She knows how to balance the rules with the people. Yes, we have targets, but she never allows the pressure to ruin our culture. That's why we stick around. (T3)

Participants also talked about the emotional labour involved in this balancing act, which kept school operations running smoothly while maintaining their identity as compassionate, approachable leaders. P4 reflected:

> Some days, it feels like I'm managing two schools—the one the district wants to see on paper, and the real one I'm trying to nurture with my team.

Despite these challenges, principals were committed to practising servant leadership. They saw their power not in fear or authority but in their ability to perform under pressure with compassion and collective resilience. P3 added:

> We keep the school running, sure. But we also keep the people thriving. That's what makes our model successful.

Female school leaders embrace a hybrid leadership style that blends the demands of their schools with a focus on relationships. Even when faced with challenges, their feminist approach fosters care, mutual respect, and a sense of justice, pushing back against dehumanising systems. They redefine what "accountability" means in education, shifting the focus to being accountable to people rather than just adhering to policies.

Discussion

The study's findings revealed that servant leadership among female principals in under-resourced South African schools is viewed as a relational governance practice. This approach fosters authority, trust, and educational improvement through collective efforts. The findings suggest that in these contexts, servant leadership acts as a framework of trust, where the legitimacy of leadership stems from ongoing ethical interactions with teachers, students, and the community, rather than from traditional bureaucratic power. This perspective shifts the role of principals from being merely individual managers to being part of a collective moral initiative grounded in care, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

A key aspect of this interpretation is the idea of leadership as a moral calling. While earlier research highlights that female principals often rely on ethical values in their leadership (De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020), this study conceptualises this moral focus as a means of building relational trust, which is essential for schools to operate effectively despite significant structural challenges. Moral commitment serves as the foundation for principals to establish credibility, emotional safety, and collaboration among staff and the community. This aligns with the work of Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer (2021), who stress the importance of relational trust in school improvement, and resonates with feminist scholarship that acknowledges care and emotional labour as valid leadership practices (Mama, 2001; Moorosi, 2021). In this context, moral calling transcends personal belief; it evolves into a relational strategy that enhances organisational stability and fosters collective commitment in environments where resources are limited.

The findings also offer a new perspective on collective leadership, viewing it as a shift in how power is understood within school governance. Instead of seeing authority as a top-down control mechanism, participants described leadership as a shared responsibility that involves collaboration among teachers and community members. This supports Oplatka and Tamir's (2020) argument that collaborative leadership can build resilience in challenging situations. Rooted in feminist theory, these practices embody a non-dominant approach to leadership that prioritises empowerment, participation, and accountability in relationships. The principles of servant leadership—such as empathy, inclusivity, and service—further enhance this perspective, demonstrating how leadership can uphold organisational accountability while also encouraging democratic involvement.

In schools with limited resources, this collective governance model has real consequences for the quality of education. By nurturing supportive professional environments, principals were able to enhance teacher morale, reduce burnout, and maintain consistent instruction even in the face of structural challenges. When teachers feel appreciated and students acquire a sense of belonging, schools cultivate a stronger atmosphere of engagement that not only leads to academic gains but also supports social and emotional growth. The focus on comprehensive learner development aligns with Blackmore's (2013) critique of restrictive performance-based accountability systems, underscoring the significance of socio-emotional learning and inclusive school cultures for achieving long-term educational success.

The study highlights how teacher motivation is fostered through empathy, recognition, and professional development instead of relying solely on formal incentives. This aligns with the findings of Katitaş et al. (2022), who emphasised the positive link between servant leadership and teacher morale. In situations where financial rewards and material resources are scarce, relational leadership practices become essential motivational tools. Principals can improve commitment by acknowledging teachers' efforts, providing opportunities for professional development, and cultivating supportive professional relationships. These practices help build relational trust, which acts as a form of social capital that supports school improvement in environments with limited resources.

Another important insight from the findings is the need to balance bureaucratic accountability with the values of servant leadership. Principals employed a dual approach of compliance and ethical adaptation, meeting policy requirements while still prioritising care-oriented leadership practices. Using Naidoo and Potokri's (2021) framework of contextualised leadership in postcolonial education systems, this study

illustrates how leaders can navigate institutional constraints without sacrificing relational values. These practices show that leadership involves both political and moral dimensions, especially for women working within gendered institutional frameworks. This study contributes three significant theoretical insights into the field of educational leadership. First, it reconceptualises moral calling as the process of building relational trust, demonstrating that ethical commitment serves as a practical governance tool that allows school communities to function effectively despite structural inequalities. Second, the study redefines collective leadership as a type of relational power, challenging traditional hierarchical models of school leadership by illustrating how authority can emerge from collaboration, shared responsibility, and participatory decision-making.

The research expands on servant leadership theory by placing it within feminist and intersectional frameworks. It shows how female leaders in under-resourced areas of the Global South practise servant leadership not just as a philosophy but also to adapt and resist challenges. While traditional views of servant leadership have faced criticism for being too managerial and lacking political engagement (Blackmore, 2013), this study reveals that in marginalised contexts, it can serve as a transformative practice rooted in feminist ethics of care (Mama, 2001; Moorosi, 2021). Intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989) sheds light on how these leaders navigate the complex layers of gender inequality, socioeconomic challenges, and pressures from policies that demand accountability.

By examining servant leadership through these relational and intersectional perspectives, the study offers a deeper understanding of leadership in the Global South, where success often hinges on building relationships rather than relying solely on institutional authority. The findings also carry significant implications for fostering social change within educational systems. By illustrating how leadership that is relational, empathetic, and collaborative can enhance school communities in under-resourced areas, the study underscores the potential of leadership practices grounded in care and shared responsibility to tackle educational disparities. Acknowledging and institutionalising these leadership styles could lead to more inclusive governance models that prioritise emotional intelligence, relational trust, and community involvement alongside technical leadership skills.

Conclusion

This study focused on understanding how female school principals in low socioeconomic contexts of South Africa practise servant leadership, and how these practices enhance educational quality despite them facing structural and gender-related challenges. The participants shared that their leadership is rooted in moral and relational values like empathy, responsibility, and care. By engaging in emotional labour and daily interactions, these principals fostered trust among teachers and learners. They improved teacher motivation through affirmation, mentorship, and opportunities for professional development, while also cultivating inclusive school cultures through shared and participatory leadership. Additionally, the principals expanded the concept of educational excellence by focusing on the holistic development of learners instead of just academic success. In doing so, they pushed back against narrow accountability measures and prioritised the social and emotional well-being of students alongside their academic achievements. Although policy discussions often neglect the impact of female school leaders, the findings highlight the crucial role these principals play in creating supportive and resilient school environments.

The study adds to the understanding of servant leadership and feminist leadership theory by demonstrating how leadership focused on relationships and care can challenge patriarchal norms in educational contexts. The findings back up De Bruyn and Mestry's (2020) claim that feminist leadership is inherently moral, revealing that female principals in underprivileged areas lead effectively by using emotional intelligence, ethical commitment, and relational authority. Thus, servant leadership is seen not just as a practice for social justice but also as a caring philosophy grounded in shared responsibility and relational accountability. Notably, the principals managed to balance relational leadership with the demands of bureaucratic accountability, proving that care-based leadership can align with policy requirements and maintain performance even in environments with limited resources.

On a practical level, the findings emphasise the importance of leadership development and policy training programmes that focus on gender sensitivity, relational leadership skills, instructional leadership, and emotional literacy. Such training can better prepare leaders to address the complex social and institutional challenges faced by disadvantaged schools. While the study included only 12 participants, it lays a solid groundwork for future research, including longitudinal and comparative studies that explore how feminist and relational leadership practices can impact school improvement and educational equity in various contexts.

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Teaching Academic Literacy (Al) in English to African Students: Thinking Beyond the Fixation on the Mechanics of the Language of Instruction

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Abstract

In this article I examine the role of English as the language of instruction for academic literacy teaching in African universities. I employ a critical literature review and a self-reflexivity lens to examine how English as a language of instruction influences academic literacy provision. To do this, I reflect on my positionality and analyse studies on the intricate politics of language in Africa, and how they both implicate academic literacy pedagogy. I argue that while understanding the rules of English is essential for clarity, academic literacy practitioners should not fixate on them. Rather, they should focus on the development of cognitive competencies such as critical thinking, which allows them to socialise students into disciplinary/university ways of knowledge production, dissemination, or contestation. Furthermore, obsessing over the mechanics of English in academic literacy contributes to entrenching the prestigious position of English in African universities while marginalising and disempowering many students and staff with different linguistic traditions and repertoires. Finally, academic staff who subscribe uncritically to this model of academic literacy teaching expose their own intellectual inferiority, maintaining the coloniality of knowledge and language in Africa. To this end, I propose an academic literacy model that focuses on the cognitive foundation of African students to ensure that they see knowledge as negotiated or contested.

Keywords: academic literacy, English language, African students, language of instruction

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Introduction and Background

Globally, higher education is at a crossroad between massification, de-funding, transformation, and generative artificial intelligence (AI). In South African universities, these challenges are posing serious threats to knowledge production, and many academics are concerned not only with the quantity of students entering university spaces but also with attrition rates and/or the quality of graduates entering the world of work (Angu, 2024; Jansen &Walters, 2022; Mbembe, 2016). In academic literacy (AL), massification and the irruption of generative AI have led to students "grappling with the traditional demands of academic literacies" such as critical thinking, reading, and writing (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 300). These students not only bring different linguistic repertoires to university spaces but are also exposed to digital technologies, making information easily accessible. For example, generative AI has provided them with alternative ways to generate texts about the knowledge ecology, often uncritically or without any sense of agency. They conflate information with knowledge because they lack the cognitive capacity to see knowledge production as a process of creative imagination, contestation, or negotiation (Angu, 2024; Vasquez et al., 2019).

However, these digital disruptions remind us that we have a moral obligation to teach students about the pitfalls of generative AI and how to use it ethically and responsibly in scholarly texts (Angu, 2024; Mckenna &Tshuma, 2025; Specia & Osman, 2015). Therefore, what does it mean to be academically literate today and how should we teach academic literacy to African students? To answer this question, I begin with my own uneasy encounter with English in post-independent Cameroon and post-apartheid South Africa. Most importantly, I have decided to frame this article on the teaching and learning of academic literacy in the South African context, and I have drawn on my experiences as first, a postgraduate student and later, a lecturer for more than 25 years. Although I am thinking from the South African higher education perspective, I am mindful that some African universities have different language policies or have decided to maintain English as the language of instruction. Many of these African universities still consider English an international language that will expose African students to a world of opportunities (Hutton, 2010; Jeyifo, 2018; Pennycook, 2007; Wright, 2002).

I am not arguing that English is not an international language or the language of business and politics. Rather, I am against the fixation on the mechanics of the language and ignoring the process of deeper learning in academic literacy. In fact, this fixation reduces academic literacy to a course about the rules, structure, and technical aspects of English or what Paolo Freire (1996) called "banking education" (Angu, 2024; Julius et al., 2024). Fixating on rules means academic literacy lecturers often miss the opportunity to socialise students into disciplinary/university ways of knowledge construction, dissemination, or contestation. By doing so, they renege on the promise to increase epistemological access and develop students' cognitive competencies (Boughey, 2005; Boughey & Mckenna, 2016). Moreover, the mastery and application of English language rules in academic literacy contribute to entrenching its prestigious position in African universities while inadvertently marginalising and disempowering many students and staff with different linguistic traditions and repertoires. Finally, academic staff who subscribe uncritically to this model of academic literacy teaching expose their own intellectual inferiority, maintaining the colonial knowledge and language in Africa.

To argue against the fixation on the mechanics of the language of instruction, I employ a critical literature review and a self-reflexivity lens to examine how English as a language of instruction influences academic literacy provision (see Berger, 2015; Cruz, 2015; Fook, 2014; Jesson & Lacey, 2006; Saunders & Rojon, 2011; von Seggern et al., 2023). To do this, I reflect on my positionality—Black African scholar, non-mother tongue speaker of English and academic literacy lecturer—at a South African university. Furthermore, I analyse literature on the intricate politics of language in Africa and how they implicate academic literacy pedagogy. Reflecting on my sociocultural, linguistic, and contextual biases, I critique the hegemonic position of English in African universities and provide some critical insights for academic literacy pedagogy in the South African higher education context (Jesson & Lacey, 2006; Julius et al., 2024).

The article is structured as follows: firstly, I discuss the politics of language in African universities and interrogate the democratisation of higher education in South Africa. Secondly, I examine the role of English as both a colonial and an international language, framing my discussion around the fallacy of its superiority in academic literacy. Finally, I explore academic literacy as a mode of reasoning that can help students think critically while constructing or contesting knowledge at the university level.

While I think in terms of South Africa to ground my arguments, I do not wish to invoke the ghosts of our colonial ancestors "sleeping peacefully" because English is still the language of instruction at many African universities. I am also in no position to impose or assume that my thoughts are simply generalisable or should be applied without criticism. In fact, these same arguments have been contested at my own university, and my own thinking and mastery of academic literacy have been questioned by colleagues, including some AL practitioners, because they simply conflate academic literacy with English competence (Boughey, 2002; Julius et al., 2024). When they mark students' academic projects, they spend valuable time correcting technical inaccuracies instead of the students' critical reasoning and argumentation. This is understandable and forgivable because many academic literacy practitioners at South African universities who are obsessed with the rules of English are not trained to teach academic literacy, nor do they read or publish on academic literacy. Therefore, their knowledge of the subject is not grounded in sound, empirically led evidence. Rather, the obsession is often driven by nothing more than an imagined sense of racial and class superiority. These academic literacy lecturers do not create opportunities for critical engagement, and they often reward students who can apply the rules of English accurately with high marks (Angu, 2024; Boughey, 2002; Julius et al., 2024). For me, academic literacy is a mode of reasoning or area of inquiry with its own specific norms and, therefore, cannot be conflated with English competence (Angu, 2024; Jacobs, 2013). Critical reasoning and the ability to argue are the foundational principles of academic literacy, which means it can be taught and learnt in any language.

To interrogate why academic literacy practitioners fixate on the rules of English, we return to the question of English language in Africa, "a question that continues to haunt" many African scholars (Staphorst, 2024, p. 43). For many African scholars, English "is the most widely used language for writing on [our] continent and beyond this in terms of speaking, as distinct from writing, English is also the most widely spoken language in Africa" (Jeyifo, 2018, p. 137). This places English on a pedestal, both as an intellectual language and as a lingua franca, and institutions of learning thus make concessions that maintain its power and control in Africa (Alexander 1999; Angu, 2018). For decades, proponents of African languages as languages of scholarship have criticised the hegemonic position of English in African universities. Authors such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Kwesi Prah, Neville Alexander and Birgit Brock-Utne have argued persistently that the dominance of English as the language of research and scholarship in African universities is about racial and linguistic hierarchies, as well as power and control. Thinking from the perspective of linguistic nationalism, Brock-Utne (2001, p. 118) argued:

The language question is all about power. The choice of a language of instruction in Africa is a political choice, a choice that may redistribute power in a global context as well as within an African country between elites and the masses. . . . Choosing as a language of instruction, an indigenous language, a language people speak, are familiar with and which belongs to the cultural heritage would redistribute power from the privileged few to the masses.

For Brock-Utne (2001), the use of English as the language of instruction limits access to knowledge in favour of the privileged and elites, giving them unchecked power and control over the masses, who could not learn the language. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's literary texts in the later part of his career were written in Gikuyu, extending the readership to the masses. His access to the masses through his texts posed a major threat to the government of post-independent Kenya because his scathing criticisms transcended the English-speaking population. He was eventually imprisoned not because he criticised the Kenyan government but because he did so in the language of the masses (Ngũgĩ, 1986). Moreover, the use of English as the medium of instruction symbolises the resilience of colonial power and control in contemporary Africa as well as a form of linguistic injustice (see, for example, Alexander, 2012; Brock-Utne, 2007; Nyamnjoh, 2020; Prah,

2017; Ngũgĩ, 1986). Thus, these authors have advocated for the recentring of African languages as languages of research and scholarship.

Contrary to this school of thought, the likes of Chinua Achebe, Biodun Jeyifo, and Achille Mbembe criticised Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's "nativist" position as an "absolute autochthony" or attaching a language to its ancestral place (Jeyifo, 2018, p. 135). They see English not as a curse but as a resource for which we should be eternally grateful to our colonial masters. Achebe wrote:

Those of us who have inherited the English may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. Or we may go on resenting it because it came as a package deal that included many other items of doubtful value, especially those atrocities of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire. But let us not, in rejecting the evil, throw out the good with it (1997, p. 345) . . . I have been given this language and I intend to use it. (1997, p. 348)

Achebe's ideological position forces us to think about "what," "how," and "why" we use this inheritance because although it is a colonial language, it could be "altered to suit new African surroundings" (Achebe, 1997, p. 349). I see this altering in Nyamnjoh's (2020) publication "Amos Tutuola as a Quest Hero for Endogenous Africa: Actively Anglicising the Yoruba Language and Yorubanising the English Language." Although Amos Tutuola was not a master of the English language, he "employed his creative imagination, in conversation with Yoruba folktales, to use and appropriate the English language" (Nyamnjoh, 2020, p. 91). The idea of altering to suit our African surroundings is located in Achille Mbembe and Biodun Jeyifo's view that English is an African language; it has been appropriated and is now used as a lingua franca by many Africans. For them, the ownership of English language has shifted from the West, particularly Britain, to Africa meaning, "language is like the free market. No legislature or bureaucracy prescribes the forms of speech, the structure of the language or the vocabulary that individuals use…" (Hutton, 2010, p. 640). Language as we know it performs multiple functions in human lives. For some, it is a simple carrier of their thoughts, but for others, it is a powerful instrument that can be used to liberate, connect, and empower or to marginalise, oppress, and subordinate (Achebe, 1986; Angu, 2024; Brock-Utne, 2014; Dabashi, 2015; Mgqwashu, 2014; Prah, 2009). This is because it embodies the cultural norms, values, and identity of a people. When we interact with language in our various teaching and learning spaces, its multiple functions often shape our relationships with students and colleagues. It influences the way we construct, share, or contest knowledge. In the case of AL, the ability to master and apply the rules of English or to speak the language with a particular finesse or an anglicised accent has become a yardstick for measuring intellectual depth (Angu, 2024; Julius et al., 2024). This mis-frames AL as the uncircumcised appendage of English language, and many second-language speakers who did not have the privilege of attending elite high schools or the so-called "former model C" schools are labelled "intellectually deficient" (see Angu 2024; Boughey, 2013; Jacobs, 2013; Julius et al., 2024).

Democratising Higher Education in South Africa: The "Access Versus Success" Conundrum

In South African universities, these two schools of thought continue to shape our thinking, under the guise of democratising higher education. Research on higher education celebrates the widening of university gates and the transformation of university spaces as symbols of the "Rainbow Nation" (Boughey, 2013; Mgqwashu, 2014). We take pride in the numbers of Black students and women in certain universities and disciplines. Access to higher education is no longer a farfetched dream for many African families. While we address the issue of success, we need to recognise this accomplishment because we cannot achieve success if there is no access. In fact, access provides us with the empirical data for differential analysis that can help us understand the intricate question of success. In the same vein, access means nothing without success. What is the purpose of higher education if students drop out because of psychosocial or financial challenges, or they graduate without the core competencies or literacies that empower and allow them to participate actively in the knowledge economy (Angu, 2024; Giroux, 2010; Vasquez et al., 2019)?

During the Fallist movement in South Africa in 2016, students argued that as university access increases, they remain haunted by resilient colonial histories that promote the singularity of knowledge and language instead of epistemic plurality (Angu, 2018; Mbembe, 2016). We cannot speak of the democratisation of higher education with a monolithic curriculum that resists the entry of different knowledges and languages. Similarly, Mgqwashu (2014) and Makalela (2015) argued that the imposition of English as the sole medium of instruction, despite the linguistic diversity in African universities, limits epistemological access for many South African students. How do we justify preserving particular knowledges and a particular language yet celebrate the epistemic, cultural, and linguistic diversity on university campuses? For example, in some South African universities, transformation is still being withheld by toxic institutional cultures that seek to restore the elitism of the academy and English as the de facto language of scholarship and research (Makalela, 2015; Prah, 2009). The conundrum, therefore, is the fact that although the gates of these erstwhile White-only universities are now open to all, the attrition rate among differential groups in terms of race, class, family background, gender, and school background, still skews unfavourably towards Black students in low-income brackets. This is because although universities project themselves as inclusive spaces, unfortunately, they are spaces where your race and social class matter (Angu, 2018; Jansen, 2019; Nyamnjoh, 2016). Universities are constantly competing to maintain their status as symbols of neoliberalism and racial capitalism whose purpose is to produce labour for the markets (Giroux, 2010). Academic literacy can be used to address this problem if we shift our attention to the development and provision of core competencies, such as critical reasoning, which allow students to interrogate knowledge and the language of instruction (Giroux, 2010; Vasquez et al., 2019). Instead, we present academic literacy as an English language course, using it to predict the intellectual ability of our students. Yet, our ancestors could argue persuasively and think critically without understanding a word of English.

When these universities worry about the disproportionate ratio of access to success, they are often referring to those who exit on the other side of the manufacturing process with a degree or certificate. The concern about pass rates is mainly about the cost to the university, the decline in government subsidies, and the need to create more space for new university students. They do not worry about the quality of curricula, pedagogy, and assessment practices or about students learning in a language that can never be theirs (Brock-Utne, 2007; Prah, 2009). The unequal power of English ensures that:

In Africa the tendency has been that, when we speak of literacy, we tend to think of literacy in the colonial language. We do not seem to imagine that literacy in our languages can be of the same status as literacy in the colonial language. (Prah, 2009, p. 9)

However, academic literacy practitioners should teach African students to be critical thinkers in the colonial language so that they can challenge the unequal power dynamic instead of fixating on the rules of English. The obsession with rules and with the quantifiability of almost everything reduces university education to “banking education” (Freire, 1996), an inexplicable culture of teaching to assess or what Achille Mbembe (2016, p. 31) called the “mania for assessment.” However, higher education is expected to provide “the knowledge, skills and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be a critical citizen” (Giroux, 2010, p. 716). Therefore, academic literacy is not English language; rather, it is a discipline that “allows people particularly those who are marginalized and discriminated against in society to acquire a critical consciousness” (Specia & Osman, 2015, p. 197).

In the context of academic literacy, however, success has been reduced to students’ ability to memorise and reproduce content in English rather than critical engagement with knowledge. Because they are overwhelmed with the quantity of assessments and do not read for meaning, they seek help from generative AI such as ChatGPT, quickly discovering that these algorithms can regurgitate assignments faster. They pass these assignments on to lecturers, many of whom lack the critical reasoning to point out flaws in them. While we find ways to prevent unethical knowledge production in higher education, generative AI has reminded us that we are producing graduates who are struggling to navigate this complex and technologically disruptive world. In a world shaped by different technologies, digital literacy is an important graduate attribute and should be taught at university. Students should not outsource to

generative AI the ability to think critically, which allows them to question universities and the process of knowledge production. To democratise higher education is to reimagine universities as gateways for lifelong learning and success that offer "students new ways to think critically and act with authority as independent political agents in the classroom and the larger society" (Giroux, 2010, p. 718). For me, success at university should be about sustained transformation of lives, particularly the lives of those who still exist on the fringes of different forms of injustice. Universities should provide "students with the skills and knowledge necessary for them to expand their capacities first to question the deep-seated assumptions and myths" that understanding the rules of English alone, makes them literate (Giroux, 2010, p. 718).

English: A Colonial Legacy or an International Language?

I see English as an international language and a colonial legacy that serves a dual purpose. Africa is home to many Indigenous languages and therefore, English bridges the communication gaps between Africans from different linguistic backgrounds. However, we cannot attribute the "innumerable works of creative writing, scholarship, journalism and jurisprudence in English, written by Africans" to mastery of the English language (Jeyifo, 2018, p. 138). It is African knowledge and African artistic imagination, and English is simply the carrier of the message. Significantly, English helps to promote Western epistemic, linguistic, and cultural domination, giving it unchecked power and control over Africa. Yet, formal institutions of learning in Africa keep making concessions to justify their attachment to English. The questions of knowledge relevance and the use of English as the medium of pedagogy have preoccupied the minds of African students and intellectuals for decades. Student protests from the 1960s to the 1990s in Africa, and the Fallist movements in South Africa, in particular, were about universities in Africa not only teaching epistemologies of the West but doing so in the language of the colonial master (see Angu, 2018; Atteh, 1996; Nkinyangi, 1991; Nyamnjoh, 2012, 2016; O'Halloran, 2016; Sooliman, 2019). The institutional cultures ensure that these modes of knowledge production persist unchecked under the pretence that a university is a global space, open to the world and therefore, we should teach in a global language. However, conceptualising a university as a global space should mean it is home to different students from different linguistic backgrounds and with different values, customs, and learning abilities. They want to belong and not feel alienated in this global learning space. An African university should, therefore, be a place where Black staff and students do not feel like outsiders trying to assimilate to Western ways of knowing and being (Mbembe, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2012). Modelled on the Western academy, African universities promise "freedom of thought only to stifle it through religiously adhering to a Eurocentric epistemology and Western-centric cultures and practices" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 162).

When we speak of an African university tasked with the agenda of taking us out of poverty, we are referring to a university that encourages "students to develop their intellectual and moral lives as independent individuals" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 30). Moreover, "a university has also to be culturally close to society and . . . intellectually linked to wider scholarly and scientific values of the world of learning" (Mazrui, 2003, p. 140). University education, therefore, "is the inculcation of facts as knowledge and also a set of values used in turn to appraise the knowledge in question" (Nyamnjoh, 2012, p. 129). But we find ourselves giving in to Western education and language, falling into the colonial trap that nothing worthy of learning can come from African ways of being and knowing, or from African languages (Nyamnjoh, 2012; Prah, 2009). For the university to be culturally close to society, what is taught and in which language must matter. Similarly, the knowledge should appeal to wider scholarly and scientific values because of its epistemic plurality. Learning in one's own language and having the ability to communicate in a global language is empowering. We think, read, and write in English, but our intellectual abilities should not be questioned because of a lack of English proficiency.

The Language Question and the Fallacy of English Supremacy in Academic Literacy

Is English language a colonial heirloom that African university scholars are expected to safeguard, or is its resilient presence in African universities becoming a curse that needs to be cleansed? As stated in my introduction, the language question has been approached from multiple perspectives by African scholars. On the one hand, English is the umbilical cord of Eurocentrism, and we need to sever the cord to free ourselves from the yoke of neo-colonialism. Our relationship with English as the language of instruction is one that not only perpetuates the hierarchy of languages but poses an existential threat to the survival of our own languages (Alexander, 2012; Makalela, 2015; Prah, 2009). On the other hand, English has become a lingua franca in Africa because it is used in universities and homes and on the streets of Africa (Jeyifo, 2018). Therefore, Chinua Achebe (1997), in his critique of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's appeal to Africans to write in African languages, stated that we need to see this so-called "language of the coloniser" as a blessing and not a curse. Achebe exemplified this attitude by responding to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and exposing his pejorative representation of Africa through the same coloniser's language. Moreover, he was able to connect with Nigerians across linguistic lines because of his ability to converse in English. He further argued that contrary to claims that colonialism brought English as one of its many instruments of oppression, Africans' affinity for English predates colonialism; many pre-colonial African parents decided to send their children to seminaries or mission schools because they were desperate for their children to learn English (Achebe, 1997; Jeyifo, 2018). Achebe was not against the preservation of African languages; the Igbo language and its values and cultural norms are what made him an Igbo Nigerian. Rather, he was arguing that it is empowering to own both and not to choose.

Achebe's (1997) and Mbembe's (2016) perspectives rested on the assumption that English is an international and global language but can be localised to connect people across race, class, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. We are reminded that Africans owe their survival in the global world to the English language and, most importantly, that English is the language of opportunities in business and politics. The argument against mother-tongue instruction is that Africans will struggle to access job opportunities globally (Pennycook, 2007; Wright, 2002). The international status of English is not under scrutiny. On the contrary, we should not shower praises on the calabash carrying the palm wine but on the palm wine tapper whose name is known beyond his village because of the quality of his palm wine. Mbembe is a world-renowned public intellectual because of his philosophical insights and not simply because he is able to transmit his ideas and thoughts about the world in fine English and French. I do not think he owes his critical and humanised approach to this complex world to the French language. Similarly, it is insulting to an African literary luminary like Achebe to attribute his artistic prowess to his ability to communicate fluently in English. In a global world still ordered according to racial, linguistic, and social hierarchies, it is a fallacy to think that an African graduate's Englishness is the key to navigating the challenges of a global space.

The global world, which assumes that one can only belong to it if one speaks English fluently and with a particular accent, elevates English to an unreasonably superior position (Brock-Utne, 2001; Pennycook, 2007; Prah, 2017). African students need critical reasoning and not English language fluency to navigate a global world that seeks to reject rather than embrace alternative languages and ways of knowing and being. In the process of knowledge construction, African students need the cognitive foundation to question and challenge the stereotype that one's intellectual ability is based on "epistemic fiction rather than a scientific description of the correlation between 'race' and intelligence" (Dabashi, 2015, p. xiii). Perhaps the anxieties of students are not so much about communication but a lack of the core competencies to conceptualise, develop, and defend an argument in any language and demonstrate mastery of a specific field or knowledge area.

Academic Literacy as a Mode of Critical Reasoning in Higher Education

Academic literacy at the higher education level is about critical thinking, reading, and writing. Thinking about reading and writing, Boughey and Mckenna (2016, pp. 5–6) argued:

Academic literacy courses often focus on grammar or language structure such as structuring an essay around an "introduction," "body" and "conclusion." While technical accuracy and structure are important, it is the production of an argument that is central to writing in the academy.

For Boughey and Mckenna, academic literacy was essential for deeper learning, where the emphasis is on critical reasoning rather than the rules of the English language. However, how can students construct an argument in their writing when they have not been taught what an argument is? As a mode of reasoning, academic literacy should prioritise teaching African students to see knowledge as power and the practice of freedom, providing them with the capacity to challenge racial, social, linguistic, and epistemic hierarchies. It should provide them with skills to transform their material conditions in a global world that forces Africans to continue to see their epistemic traditions and languages as unequal to those from the West (Angu,2019, 2024; Giroux, 2010; Nyamnjoh, 2020). This requires thinking, reading, and writing to question and not affirm knowledge from the West if it is not relevant to an African context.

This does not mean that they should ignore the rules of the language of instruction. Understanding the mechanics of the language of instruction is necessary for sharing and contesting knowledge in the academy. However, real value lies in the way one thinks, reads, and writes, whether in English or any other language. I am, therefore, not advocating for academic literacy practices that intentionally neglect the rules of the language of instruction. Rather, I am arguing that academic literacy development at the university level is an essential cognitive process that cannot simply be reduced to memorising and applying the rules of any specific language. We live in a world of generative AI, and African universities are dealing with students outsourcing their thinking to various algorithms. We have to embrace it and teach our students to treat AI as a tool to facilitate learning and not something that they use when they cannot think. A university is not a place where students come to get a degree; it is a place to engage with knowledge that develops their critical thinking, worldviews, global awareness, and ethical consciousness (Angu, 2019; Giroux, 2010; hooks, 1994; Mckenna & Tshuma, 2025). For example, instead of using AI to think, students can use an AI tool such as Grammarly to edit an already well-argued academic text.

If we subscribe to the first argument, then fixating on the rules of English because it is the language of instruction, or a global language is morally wrong and intellectually deceptive. For me, this fixation reduces the process of teaching and learning academic literacy to banking education (Freire, 1996). This takes away the opportunity to approach knowledge acquisition and application through academic literacy as a transformative and liberatory practice (Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994). It devalues academic literacy courses, and lecturers often miss the opportunity to socialise students into disciplinary/university ways of knowledge construction, dissemination, or contestation. By doing so, they renege on the promise to increase epistemological access and develop students' cognitive competencies (Angu, 2024; Clarence & Mckenna, 2017; Mgqwashu ,2014). Fixating on the mastery and application of English contributes to entrenching the language's prestigious position in African universities while inadvertently marginalising and disempowering many students and staff with different linguistic traditions and repertoires (Alexander, 1999, 2012; Prah, 2009, 2017). Finally, academic staff members who subscribe to this model of academic literacy, which fixates on the rules of English expose their own intellectual inferiority. This inferiority contributes to maintaining the coloniality of knowledge and language in Africa.

Concluding Thoughts

Thinking, reading, and writing at the university level are more about value and less about rules. For students to produce a valuable text, they need the cognitive ability to see the creation of knowledge as imaginative, negotiated, or contested. In fact, higher education is about adapting to new ways of knowing and responding critically to a variety of texts that are key to the academy and based on disciplinary norms and values (Angu, 2024; Boughey & Mckenna, 2016; Mgqwashu, 2011). Unfortunately, our students come to university unaware of and unprepared for these new ways of thinking, reading, and writing. They claim that they did exceptionally well in English at high school and are, therefore, academically literate. They usually do not take academic literacy courses seriously, and our superficial pedagogies help to worsen the situation.

The language of instruction has contributed minimally to socialise them to these new ways of knowing, understanding, and organising knowledge that are expected at the university level. Instead, it has racialised and politicised the problem of language, engendering the polarisation of academics and students. Many Black academics and students think we should use African languages to negotiate meaning in knowledge and increase access and success (Hungwe, 2019; Makalela, 2015; Mgqwashu, 2011, 2014). They are turning to translanguaging and code-switching in African languages to teach academic literacy, assuming it will increase epistemological access. Others, especially those who studied at elite universities in South Africa and abroad, still believe that English is the language of scholarship or the academy. Although the rules of English and African languages are important, it is the development of key essential cognitive competencies that will set students apart as graduates in the 21st century (Angu, 2024; Boughey, 2005, 2013)

Academic literacy practitioners see the curriculum and classroom as spaces of disruption and discomfort, where students wrestle with different forms of knowledge. When our students encounter these different forms of knowledge, we want them to form their own identities and have a sense of agency. We should, therefore, design and teach academic literacy in ways that grant them epistemological access to their disciplines and, most importantly, help to empower and transform their minds as they prepare to enter the changing world of work (Giroux, 2010; Mbembe, 2016; O'Halloran, 2016; Vasquez et al., 2019). As African countries grapple with social pathologies like unemployment, poverty, and social unrest, universities should produce graduates with attributes that can disrupt these pathologies.

We should think of academic literacy as an area of inquiry or mode of reasoning with its own intellectual requirements that can be taught and learned through the medium of any language or languages (Angu, 2024; Jacobs, 2013; Julius et al., 2024; Mgqwashu, 2014). Being academically literate at the university level is about communicating with intention and sound critical reasoning through any medium or language and to diverse audiences. It is the ability to construct knowledge that is contextually relevant and fit for purpose, or to challenge knowledge with sound evidence. Students "must assume the role of creative subjects who reflect critically on the process of reading and writing itself along with reflecting on the significance of language" (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 301). This does not simply mean applying the rules of English or any other language but reflecting broadly on the critical role that any language plays in the production of knowledge. This explains why students are able to cope with basic interpersonal communication skills but struggle with cognitive academic language proficiency. To think beyond the fixation on the mechanics of English is to reimagine academic literacy courses as essential to the development of students' cognitive competencies. This will ensure that African universities deliver on their mandate to produce graduates with critical thinking abilities and work readiness. Put differently, they should equip students with academic and professional literacies that enable them to contribute to transform their material conditions and empower them to participate in addressing the wicked problems of the 21st century.

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Tutors' Experiences and Perceptions of Integrating Translanguaging Pedagogy Into University Tutorials[8]

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Abstract

This paper explores tutors' experiences and perceptions of integrating translanguaging pedagogy into a tutorial system at a South African university. South African universities grapple with creating language policy implementational spaces for epistemic access and, in response, University of the Free State has adopted translanguaging through its tutorial system to mediate epistemic access. However, no studies have yet been conducted to examine the experiences and perceptions of tutors who must often implement translanguaging pedagogy. Hence, this paper aims to fill this gap by exploring tutors' experiences and perceptions regarding integrating translanguaging pedagogy into the tutorial system in various disciplines. This qualitative study deployed focus group and semi-structured interviews to elicit the experiences of tutors facilitating multilingual classrooms. The study is framed within the ubuntu translanguaging framework. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that tutors reported supportive, resistant, and contradictory perceptions on the integration of translanguaging pedagogy in the tutorial system.

Keywords: translanguaging, pedagogy, tutorial system, different disciplines, South Africa, university

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Introduction

Research on translanguaging within higher education has proliferated globally, establishing it as a critical lens for understanding multilingual practices, knowledge production, and identity construction. In the postcolonial South African terrain, however, the epistemic promise of translanguaging remains under-realised because pedagogical practices continue to be constrained by the dominance of inherited monolingual ideologies. University classrooms still struggle to integrate students' full linguistic repertoires as legitimate resources for sense-making and epistemic access, thereby reproducing exclusions in knowledge participation. While the Language Policy Framework for Higher Education (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020) offers a national directive to institutionalise multilingualism across research, teaching, and learning, the persistent disjuncture between policy and practice highlights an urgent need to embed translanguaging as a systematic pedagogical resource within higher education.

In the area of teaching and learning, the tutorial space has been identified as a key site to pilot the implementation of the Language Policy Framework, particularly because issues of linguistic and epistemic praxis within this context remain under-researched. Tutorials, or supplemental instruction, are a long-established global practice designed to provide academic support for students who encounter learning challenges. Research consistently shows that the primary purpose of tutorials is to serve as an institutional strategy for enhancing student success and reducing high dropout rates in universities (Amor et al., 2021; Da Re et al., 2017; Munley et al., 2010).

In most cases, tutoring systems are shaped by university culture, institutional policies, available learning resources, and the broader context in which they operate (López-Gómez et al., 2020). However, these systems often reproduce Eurocentric models that are transferred into complex multilingual settings, such as South Africa, without sufficient adaptation. As a result, monolingual tutoring pedagogies become normalised, limiting students' opportunities to draw on their full linguistic repertoires. Challenging this tendency, Hurst and Mona (2017) argued that translanguaging within tutorials is essential because it fosters socially just pedagogies that recognise and value linguistic diversity. This position is reinforced by growing evidence on the cognitive, linguistic, and academic affordances of multilingual learning spaces (García & Wei, 2014; Heugh et al., 2022; Makalela & da Silva, 2025).

Research on tutoring in South Africa has highlighted the significant opportunities tutorials provide for student learning and success. Clarence (2016) showed that tutorials can enhance epistemic access for tutees, while Faroa (2017) demonstrated their role in improving student engagement in higher education. More broadly, tutoring studies consistently point to their effectiveness in supporting students' cognitive development, academic achievement, professional growth, and peer learning (Arco-Tirado et al., 2020; López-Gómez et al., 2020). Yet, despite these benefits, throughput and success rates across the South African higher education system remain worryingly low (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2024). This suggests that current tutoring practices, while valuable, are not sufficient to address systemic challenges.

This paper argues that without a reorientation of tutoring towards inclusive practices that take seriously the multilingual realities of students, issues of epistemic injustice and identity alienation will persist. In line with the Language Policy Framework for Higher Education (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020), the University of the Free State's Language Policy (2023) commits to

creating spaces for epistemic access by embedding translanguaging pedagogy within its tutorial system. Building on that policy shift, this paper explores the potential of translanguaging pedagogy—understood as the use of students' unitary linguistic repertoires to make meaning of their bi/multilingual worlds—as a strategy to transform tutorials into spaces of equity and inclusion. Specifically, the paper investigates an under-researched area: how university tutoring systems can integrate the use of more than one language simultaneously as languages of input and output in complex multilingual contexts.

Translanguaging pedagogy

While Cen Williams (1994) is often credited with coining the term "translanguaging" in relation to Welsh–English bilingual education, it is important to note that the practice itself predates his description. Williams' formulation captured a pedagogical technique whereby learners engaged in the receptive and productive use of two languages—such as reading in Welsh and writing in English (Baker, 2011; García & Wei, 2014). However, this framing risks obscuring the deeper historical and social realities of multilingualism. As Makalela (2016, 2018) underscored, translanguaging is not an innovation of the Welsh context but a long-standing social practice, particularly visible in the Global South, where speakers have always drawn fluidly on their unitary linguistic repertoires to make meaning, negotiate identities, and sustain epistemic continuity. In this sense, Williams' contribution lies in naming and formalising a practice that multilingual communities had been enacting for centuries.

In their introductory notes on translanguaging and language policy in the Global South, Makalela and da Silva (2023, p. 1) contended: "There seems no doubt in our view that translanguaging has taken a center stage as a viable strategy to transform learning and teaching practices that have historically followed the one-oneness ideology of the European Enlightenment." This "one-oneness" view—rooted in colonial modernity—has long sustained epistemic injustice by fragmenting linguistic repertoires into discrete, enumerable entities and by privileging European languages as the sole vehicles of knowledge. By contrast, translanguaging pedagogy advances a decolonial alternative that recognises the full linguistic repertoire of bi/multilingual speakers as a unitary semiotic resource for meaning-making, identity affirmation, and knowledge production (García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014; Makalela, 2015). In this way, translanguaging not only disrupts monolingual ideologies but also reclaims epistemic spaces historically denied to multilingual communities, positioning their practices as central to the transformation of education in the Global South.

Since its initial formulation, the meaning of translanguaging has been expanded and contextualised across diverse localities and scholarly traditions. García (2009, p. 45), for instance, defined it as the "multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds." Building on this, translanguaging has been conceptualised in multiple ways: as pedagogy, as translingual practice, and as *Ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy* rooted in African epistemologies (Canagarajah, 2011; Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García, 2009; Makalela, 2015). Further variations include *pedagogical translanguaging* (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021) and *translanguaging as theory and practice* (Li, 2018). Each of these iterations reflects particular contextual emphases, demonstrating that translanguaging is not a fixed construct but a dynamic and evolving framework whose meanings shift according to sociolinguistic and epistemic conditions.

For this study, the focus is not on the initial version of translanguaging but on Ubuntu translanguaging, which offers a distinct African epistemological paradigm. As Makalela (2017, p. 14) explained, it seeks to "describe unbounded, fluid, mobile and versatile uses of languages in the 21st century." Unlike approaches that impose artificial boundaries between languages, Ubuntu translanguaging reflects the authentic praxis of speakers who draw seamlessly on their full repertoires in meaning-making. Grounded in the philosophy of Ubuntu, this transformative paradigm emphasises relationality, interdependence, and both vertical and horizontal flows of negotiated meaning (Makalela, 2026).

Central to this translanguaging framework is Ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy, which foregrounds cultural competence as a resource for navigating complex multilingual spaces. By disrupting linguistic hierarchies and addressing epistemic injustices, it generates inclusive spaces that afford students multiple pathways for knowing and becoming. In the context of this study—where student demographics are highly heterogeneous—Ubuntu translanguaging provides a relevant and robust theoretical grounding. More specifically, its application within the tutorial system makes it possible to reimagine tutorials as decolonial pedagogical sites: spaces where students' diverse repertoires are not only validated but are actively mobilised to enhance epistemic access and transform academic support into a socially just practice.

Tutorial Systems at Universities

Tutor Development and Preparedness

There is an agreement among scholars that tutors can be lecturers or undergraduate and postgraduate students. For this reason, it is necessary that tutors go through a capacitation or development path to be equipped with approaches meant to facilitate their tutorials. Elsewhere, research shows that tutors who are not trained may resort to pedagogical practices that have negative consequences for student engagement and success (Faroa et al., 2025; Motaung & Makombe, 2021; Sithole, 2024). Therefore, it is important that tutoring systems provide the necessary skills for tutors to effectively facilitate and enhance their tutorial practices. The training should consider tutors' personal qualities and capacity to integrate different attributes, which may include the ability to communicate in different African languages, and pedagogical approaches to managing language diversity when planning, organising, and implementing tutorial lessons.

Considering this, one aspect of the training should highlight the need for awareness of cultural competence given that tutoring systems cater for diverse students in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic backgrounds, and languages. It is worth noting that tutoring offers a variety of skills that can be learned by tutors, including, amongst others, communication, problem solving, collaboration, classroom management, and development of self-esteem (Lin et al., 2025; Sithole, 2024). Tai and Zuo (2024) explored the use of translanguaging by an English second language tutor in online language tutorials at a university in Hong Kong. Their study found that the workshop for professional development of the tutor's capacity to implement translanguaging was important in his practice. The study also indicated that the ideology and willingness of the tutor enabled the creation of a translanguaging space in a virtual environment.

A recent study by Nsele et al. (2024) at University of KwaZulu-Natal revealed that post bilingual tutor training, tutors had more confidence to advocate for the usage of tutees' home languages; the tutors allowed tutees to use their home languages during tutorials to enable them to ask more

questions and enhance classroom engagement. Despite that, the study revealed misunderstandings about the purpose of tutorials and the role of lecturers, which had negative implications for policy advocacy in the teaching and learning space. The study concluded that there is a need for workshops for both tutors and lecturers. Although tutors had been attending such workshops, greater lecturer stakeholder buy-in was required given that bilingual tutorials have the potential to co-construct knowledge spaces that enable knowledge sharing.

Access to Learning and Validation of Identity

Research on tutoring consistently highlights its academic benefits, particularly as a peer-learning space where tutors and tutees engage with difficult disciplinary concepts (Layton & McKenna, 2016; Roscoe & Chi, 2007). In the South African context, studies show that tutorials play a central role in enabling epistemic access. For example, Clarence (2016) and Leach (2015) demonstrated that tutorials help students navigate ways of knowing that extend beyond formal lectures. Madiba's (2014) study at the University of Cape Town further illustrated this potential, showing how economics tutorials were used to develop multilingual glossaries that scaffolded concept literacy through isiXhosa and English. Similarly, Mwaniki (2016) found that the use of students' full linguistic repertoires in tutorials optimised understanding, thus positioning translanguaging as a language management strategy.

A number of other studies confirm that translanguaging enables deeper content engagement. Maphalala and Mpofu (2020) showed how tutees and tutors collaboratively drew on multilingual repertoires to navigate content, with home languages facilitating questioning and comprehension. Batyi (2022) reported similar findings in tourism communication tutorials, where translanguaging not only enhanced conceptual understanding but also expanded students' academic literacy. These studies collectively demonstrate that translanguaging tutorials transform knowledge access by aligning teaching strategies with the multilingual realities of students.

Beyond learning access, translanguaging tutorials also affirm student identities and foster belonging. Ramafikeng's (2024) study in an occupational therapy course showed that tutorials became sites of co-created knowledge, offering both epistemic access and a stronger sense of inclusion for students who previously felt alienated. Likewise, Motaung (2024) found that translanguaging practices at University of the Free State created comfortable, collaborative spaces for tutors and tutees. However, English-only approaches risk undermining these benefits because English hegemonic practices limit the activation of translanguaging pedagogy (Ngidi & Mncwango, 2022). This underscores the need for systemic shifts from language fixity to linguistic fluidity and for tutor training on facilitating multilingual tutorials (Makalela, 2018; Yafele & Makalela, 2022).

Ngwabe et al. (2025) reinforced this argument in their study of tutorial programmes in education, where tutors intentionally employed translanguaging during group activities to address linguistic diversity. Their findings highlighted that translanguaging not only deepened conceptual discussion but also acted as an inclusive pedagogy that validated students' cultural and linguistic identities.

The studies cited above demonstrate that tutorials can be powerful spaces for access to learning and recognition of identity when translanguaging is deliberately integrated into pedagogy. They show that multilingual tutorials afford epistemic access by enabling students to

draw on their full repertoires while also affirming identities in ways that counter epistemic injustice. However, they also suggest that realising this potential requires systemic reorientation of tutorial systems, moving away from monolingual traditions toward multilingual practices supported by policy, training, and institutional commitment.

Theoretical Assumptions

In an integrative review of translanguaging studies, Chaka (2020) identified seven theoretical orientations: humanising pedagogy, socially just pedagogy, coloniality, decoloniality, Southern frameworks, autoethnography, and Ubuntu translanguaging. A unifying thread across these frameworks is the critique of neocolonial ideologies that perpetuate the subjugation of Southern theories (Pennycook & Makoni, 2018). While all are valuable, this study focuses specifically on contrasting mainstream translanguaging theory with the Ubuntu translanguaging framework.

Translanguaging, as theorised by García (2009) and Li (2018), has gained global traction for conceptualising how bi/multilingual speakers mobilise their repertoires as unitary semiotic resources. Wei (2011, cited in Wei, 2018) described it as creating a social space where dimensions of history, experience, ideology, and capacity converge in coordinated performance. While this framing is important, Ubuntu translanguaging goes further by grounding the practice in an African epistemological paradigm that resists named and hierarchised languages (Makalela, 2016, 2017, 2019).

Ubuntu translanguaging advances an ontological and epistemological shift rooted in Ubuntu/Botho—captured in the adages umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (isiZulu) or motho ke motho ka batho (Sesotho)—which emphasise relationality, interdependence, and co-existence (Makalela, 2016). Within this paradigm, no language is complete without the other; languages are fluid, overlapping, and interdependent. This creates conditions for what Makalela (2016, 2019) termed discontinuous–continuous and horizontal–vertical multilingualism, which moves beyond fixed boundaries of language towards dynamic flows of meaning-making.

For this study, Ubuntu translanguaging provides a relevant and robust theoretical grounding for understanding the tutorial system in a South African university. It enables us to see tutorials as pedagogical sites where access to learning is created not by privileging one language, but by valuing interdependence across repertoires. At the same time, it recognises tutorials as spaces of identity affirmation where belonging is fostered through acknowledgement of students' multilingual realities.

Importantly, this framework also guides the analysis of tutor attitudes. Attitudes towards translanguaging may be positive, negative, or contradictory, reflecting implicit and explicit value judgements about languages. Ubuntu translanguaging offers tools to interpret these tensions within a transformative paradigm that disrupts hierarchies and centres inclusive meaning-making. In doing so, it frames the tutorial system as a space of systemic curricular transformation where multilingualism is re-imagined as horizontal and vertical, fluid and interdependent. Whereas mainstream translanguaging highlights the fluidity of repertoires for meaning-making, Ubuntu translanguaging extends this by situating access to learning and recognition of identity within an African epistemological paradigm of interdependence and belonging (see Table 1).

Table 1

Comparison of Main Mainstream Translanguaging With Ubuntu Translanguaging

Dimension	Mainstream Translanguaging (García, Wei, Li)	Ubuntu Translanguaging (Makalela)
Origin/framing	Coined in Welsh–English schooling context; later expanded globally	Rooted in African epistemologies (Ubuntu/Botho) and Global South multilingual practices
View of language	Unitary repertoire beyond named languages	Interdependence of repertoires; "no language is complete without the other"
Pedagogical focus	Meaning-making through flexible use of repertoires	Cultural competence, relationality, and co-existence in knowledge-making
Philosophical base	Poststructuralist critique of bounded languages	Ubuntu ethics: umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu / motho ke motho ka batho
Multilingualism	Dynamic, fluid, translanguaging space	Horizontal & vertical multilingualism; discontinuous-continuous flows
Epistemic orientation	Disrupts monolingual ideologies	Provides decolonial epistemic alternative; centres Southern ways of knowing
Identity	Creates social space for bilingual/multilingual identity performance	Affirms belonging and collective identity; language as relational ecology

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative approach to explore tutors' attitudes/perceptions toward the integration of translanguaging pedagogy into the tutorial system at a South African university. The design was selected to enable context-specific and rich insights into tutors' experiences, practices, and perceptions. This qualitative approach was consistent with a research paradigm that reflects and emphasises authentic experiences of the participants in order to discover patterns on how tutors experienced, practised, and perceived the integration of translanguaging pedagogy in the tutorial space.

Participants

Twelve tutors drawn from five faculties participated in this study. Participation was voluntary; an open invitation email was sent to tutors across seven faculties and, despite several reminders, only 12 tutors responded. Of these, five were from the Faculty of Education, three from the Faculty of Humanities, and two from the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, while the Faculties of Law and Theology were each represented by one tutor. Data were collected through focus group discussions with eight tutors, and semi-structured interviews with the remaining four.

Sampling Procedure

A voluntary sampling design was employed to recruit participants for both focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Twelve tutors who had received training on translanguaging in multilingual tutorials volunteered to participate. The sample included both first-time tutors and those with more than one year of experience. Focus group discussions and interviews were scheduled in consultation with participants based on their confirmed availability.

Data Collection Process

The study employed two qualitative approaches for data collection: focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The twelve tutors participated on a voluntary basis. Focus group discussions were conducted with eight tutors to capture shared experiences, collective dynamics, and points of convergence across faculties. Semi-structured interviews were held with four tutors to allow for deeper individual reflection on their practices and perspectives. Data collection took place after the tutors had completed training and engaged in tutoring sessions, ensuring that they could draw on both the training and their lived tutoring experiences when responding.

Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis as primary analytic approach, providing a systematic procedure for moving from qualitative data to meaningful themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and carefully examined to generate codes and broader thematic categories. Thematic analysis is particularly suited for identifying patterns of meaning in participants' accounts, enabling both description and interpretation of experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis proceeded through six iterative phases: familiarisation with the data through repeated reading, systematic coding of significant features, grouping codes into potential themes, reviewing and refining these themes against the dataset, defining and naming the final themes, and producing the analytical narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

The study forms part of the broad research project that has obtained ethical clearance from the General/Human Research Ethics Committee. The participants were provided with a detailed information leaflet that explained the aim, objectives, and right to withdraw at any time and all submitted their informed consent form to partake in the study. The participants were informed of the confidentiality of what they said during the interviews or focus group discussions, and that their details would be anonymised with pseudonyms throughout the study.

Findings

The analysis generated three main themes: challenges of integrating translanguaging pedagogy in the tutorial system, tutors' translanguaging practices in the tutorial system, and the role of tutor training in enabling translanguaging pedagogy. Each of these themes is further elaborated below through sub-themes that reflect specific patterns in the data.

Integrating Translanguaging Pedagogy in the Tutorial System

This theme addresses the challenges tutors faced when attempting to apply translanguaging pedagogy within tutorials. Although the value of translanguaging was widely acknowledged, tutors' experiences revealed tensions between its theoretical promise and the practical realities of implementation.

Limited Knowledge of African Languages

This sub-theme captures tutors' accounts of the difficulties they encountered when attempting to integrate translanguaging into tutorials. While tutors recognised the value of translanguaging for learning access and identity affirmation, many described a lack of proficiency in African languages as a significant constrain. This is illustrated in the excerpts below:

> I would say for me, I do not really know a lot of languages, which makes it difficult for me to understand if someone is talking in Sesotho or isiZulu or whatever African languages . . . . because I speak Afrikaans and English. (T1)

> I would say the one that I observed mainly was just based on how law is very Latin based, and concepts are very complex in the sense that at times we would not have a word in, like in, different language for me to frame it . . . because I realised that we would have certain concepts where you ask, "Okay guys what is this in your language?" and get a lot of people like, "No man we don't have such as word in our language" right, that became difficult in a sense. And also in regard to explaining certain concepts, and when it comes to explaining those concepts, ensure that like, the meaning is intact, you know, because a simple word *nje*, just like let's say uhm . . . "ubulele" in isiXhosa it means a variety of things (were you sleeping? did you kill? uhm, did you say thank you")—all in one word. So, you can easily lose the students that you are speaking to, or students can easily, in fact, lose you in terms of them basically translating. That is main issue that I saw in terms of translanguaging. (T2)

The excerpts reveal a tension between tutors' perceptions of language proficiency and the underlying principles of translanguaging pedagogy. Tutor T1, who speaks Afrikaans and English, expressed concern about her inability to understand other African languages, which view assumes that effective translanguaging requires the tutor to know and understand the languages of all tutees. However, translanguaging pedagogy does not rest on the tutor's multilingual proficiency but rather on their ability to create a translanguaging space that legitimises and enables students to draw from their full linguistic repertoires (Li, 2018). The tension here highlights a key challenge—while tutors recognise the multilingual realities of their classrooms, their own perceptions of language knowledge may limit their capacity to facilitate translanguaging practices effectively.

Tutor T2, who teaches a law module, raised concerns about the difficulty of rendering legal concepts into African languages. He explained that some terms do not have readily available equivalents, a challenge confirmed by his students. Reflecting on these experiences, he argued that such ambiguities risk confusing students and disrupting communication between tutors and tutees.

However, while T2 perceived this as a limitation, the example resonates with the Ubuntu translanguaging principle of *incompletion*. As Makalela (2026) explained, African multilingual practices—including code-switching, co-assembling, and fluid translation—are inherently guided by Ubuntu, and reflect advanced epistemic strategies. From this perspective, the semantic flexibility T2 observed is not a shortcoming but a resource; it affirms African ontologies of relationality, where meaning is always co-constructed and never fully contained in a single linguistic form.

Perceptions Towards English in the Tutorial System

Another challenge identified in integrating translanguaging pedagogy relates to the role of English in tutorials. The data suggest two interconnected issues: tutors' own limited proficiency in English and students' resistance to English-only interactions.

> I can work from the front explaining and she will go to the tables explain to them in English or in their own languages because English is also not my best language, so I forget words . . . I have minimal wording . . . so sometimes my English does not work, sometimes it does. (T3)

This reflects both the tutor's limited command of English and her reliance on other languages to support students. Similarly, T4 observed:

> Most of the students do not like speak in English.

T5 echoed this by reporting complaints from students:

> There is so too much English.

These excerpts suggest that students prefer to use their own languages—Afrikaans, Sesotho, Sepedi, isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Venda—to engage with content and tutors.

As observed from the data presented above, the findings highlight how the dominance of English poses challenges to both tutors and students. For tutors, limited proficiency can hinder communication, while for students, English-only tutorials risk alienating them from fuller participation. From an Ubuntu translanguaging perspective, such resistance is not a deficit but a call to reimagine tutorials as multilingual spaces where diverse repertoires are legitimised and actively mobilised. In this way, moving beyond English-only practices becomes central—not only for access to learning but also for the recognition of identity in the tutorial system.

Tutors' Translanguaging Practices

This theme explores how tutors enacted translanguaging pedagogy in their tutorials. The findings reveal that translanguaging not only enhanced comprehension but also fostered collaboration, flexibility, and inclusivity in the tutorial system. One of the most prominent practices was the use of paired tutoring.

Translanguaging Enhances Paired Tutoring

Strategy

Paired tutoring was identified as a valuable strategy for integrating translanguaging into tutorials across different disciplines. Tutors explained that working in pairs allowed them to complement each other's linguistic strengths and provide support to students in multiple languages. As T3 explained:

> I will explain it in English, and then when someone does not understand it, they know from the first few tutorials that [my fellow tutor] can talk the language, so then she will go to each table and ask those who don't understand to explain to them in their own language . . . so it makes it two times easier. Then I don't need to repeat myself in English. It works—it is a very good strategy to implement.

Similarly, T7 described how translanguaging was intentionally incorporated into their practice:

> We decided to incorporate translanguaging in the tutorials, be it how we explain, be it how we ask questions. We try to phrase them in different languages. Even with the icebreakers, we try to use different languages . . . to get a feel or good sense of who speaks what language and who will be comfortable with certain languages.

These accounts highlight several important dimensions of translanguaging practices. First, co-facilitation enabled tutors to rely on one another's language strengths, ensuring that students who struggled with English could still access content in familiar languages. Unlike in Theme 1, where English was perceived as a barrier, here English was treated as a resource that could be combined with African languages for fuller comprehension. Second, tutors used translanguaging not only for content delivery but also for community building, as shown in the use of multilingual icebreakers to establish students' linguistic biographies and create inclusive spaces. Thus, paired tutoring supported access to learning by reducing language barriers and ensuring comprehension while also fostering the recognition of identity by validating students' linguistic repertoires and encouraging them to participate in their preferred languages.

Constructing a Comfortable Learning Space

Tutors consistently linked translanguaging with the creation of a more inclusive and supportive tutorial environment. Unlike lecture halls—where English dominates and students are often reluctant to ask questions—tutorials offered opportunities for freer engagement when translanguaging was encouraged. T8 reflected:

> I think translanguaging used in the tutorial sessions is the best thing ever, because when you go to the lectures . . . they speak English . . . students are scared to ask questions. But when they get to tutorials, they see someone almost on the same level, so they're open because the environment is already inclusive depending on how the tutor is inclusive and how he uses strategies. Starting with translanguaging in tutorials is the best for me. I think this is the most inclusive environment.

Other tutors echoed this view. T9 observed:

> If you are comfortable to communicate in your language [it] creates a healthy environment . . . there will never be a dull moment in tutorial sessions.

Similarly, T10 described how shifting languages transformed participation:

> Once you started communicating in different languages then the environment started changing in the sense that people begin to feel more comfortable and relate with you. When I moved from speaking English to Sesotho, people eased up and it became easier to engage.

Together, these accounts illustrate how translanguaging pedagogy fosters a climate of trust, openness, and active participation. By validating students' linguistic repertoires, tutorials become

spaces where learners feel comfortable to ask questions, share perspectives, and engage in dialogue that would otherwise be constrained in English-only settings. This finding aligns with previous research that identified translanguaging as a socially just pedagogy for building inclusive learning environments (Ramafikeng, 2024). Ultimately, creating a comfortable tutorial space through translanguaging advances both access to learning and the recognition of identity.

Tutor Training in Enabling Translanguaging Pedagogy

One of the key factors in implementing translanguaging pedagogy within the tutorial system is the preparation of tutors. Training provides not only strategies for managing multilingual tutorials but also opportunities for reflection on how best to support students' learning and engagement. While the training received by tutors in this study was considered useful, participants emphasised that it represented only an introductory step and called for a more tailored, in-depth approach.

The Value and Limits of Current Training

T11 reflected on the strengths and limitations of the training:

> It was a good introduction in terms of the whole process of translanguaging, in terms of what we can do and how far we should limit it, what we need to take into consideration. . . . I will say it needs to go deeper in a sense that it is more specific to faculties. In EMS [Economic and Management Sciences] courses it is easier to explain numbers in different languages because numbers are more constant . . . whereas when you move to theory-based courses it becomes quite tricky because meaning can be lost. Having a more structured, faculty-based approach would be very useful.

This excerpt shows that while T11 appreciated the training as an orientation, he recognised the need for more discipline-specific strategies. Translanguaging is not uniformly applicable across all subjects, and tutors require guidance that speaks to the linguistic and conceptual demands of their own faculties. By contrast, T12 highlighted the immediate benefits of the training:

> The training provided useful strategies for integrating learners' home languages alongside English to enhance comprehension and participation. I also appreciated the interactive approach, which allowed me to reflect on my own teaching practices and explore ways to bridge language barriers effectively.

Here, T12 points to the practical impact of training, particularly in enabling tutors to value students' home languages and to adjust their pedagogical practices to foster inclusion.

Synthesis

Together, these accounts suggest that tutor training is central to embedding translanguaging pedagogy in the tutorial system. Training equips tutors with strategies to support multilingual participation and prompts reflection on their teaching identities. At the same time, tutors argue that future training should be more faculty-specific and in-depth in order to address the varied epistemological demands of different disciplines. Strengthening tutor training in this way would not only enhance access to learning but also ensure that tutorials become sites for the recognition of identity, where students' full linguistic repertoires are valued as resources for knowledge-making.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore tutors' attitudes towards integrating translanguaging pedagogy into the tutorial system across different disciplines. The findings reveal three broad areas of insight: the challenges tutors experienced, their translanguaging practices, and the role of tutor training in enabling translanguaging pedagogy.

The first area of insight concerned tutors' perceived lack of knowledge of African languages. For example, T1, who is bilingual in Afrikaans and English, expressed difficulty in understanding tutees who used isiZulu or Sesotho. This perception reflects a common misconception that tutors themselves must be multilingual in order for translanguaging to occur. However, translanguaging pedagogy positions tutors as facilitators who create spaces for students to mobilise their own repertoires, and not as experts in all languages (Li, 2018). This finding echoes García and Wei (2014) and Creese and Blackledge (2010) who cautioned against equating translanguaging with translation or code-switching.

Another challenge was raised in a disciplinary context. T2, working in law, illustrated how isiXhosa terms such as "ubulele" can have multiple meanings ("did you kill?" "were you sleeping?" "did you say thank you?"). While this tutor viewed semantic multiplicity as a difficulty, the Ubuntu translanguaging framework (Makalela, 2016, 2026) interprets such linguistic flexibility as an epistemic resource—an enactment of incompletion where meaning emerges relationally. This finding extends previous work (Heugh et al., 2022) by showing how law tutorials can expose the limits of direct equivalence and the potential of translanguaging to affirm African epistemologies.

A further challenge was linked to English. One bilingual tutor admitted that her limited proficiency in English sometimes hindered communication. Yet, paradoxically, English was also viewed as a valuable resource when paired with African languages. This aligns with Ngidi and Mncwango (2022), who showed that English dominance in higher education is both enabling and excluding, depending on context. Here, tutors' reflections highlight the tension between English as a gatekeeping language and English as a shared resource in multilingual tutorials.

Despite these challenges, tutors demonstrated creative practices to facilitate learning—the second area of insight. One strategy was paired tutoring, where tutors drew on each other's linguistic strengths. As T3 described, one tutor explained concepts in English while the other clarified them in students' home languages. This collaborative practice supports Ngwabe et al. (2025), who argued that co-facilitation enables translanguaging to be systematically embedded in tutorials.

Tutors also used translanguaging in planning and delivery, from phrasing questions in multiple languages to introducing multilingual icebreakers (T7). These practices resonate with Maphalala and Mpofu (2020), who found that intentional translanguaging scaffolds comprehension and affirms students' linguistic biographies. In this study, such strategies not only improved content access but also validated students' identities in multilingual classrooms.

Another important finding was that translanguaging helped construct comfortable and inclusive tutorial spaces. T8 described tutorials as "the most inclusive environment" compared to lecture halls where English dominates. T9 and T10 similarly emphasised that translanguaging created a "healthy environment" in which students became more confident to participate. These findings confirm Ramafikeng (2024) and Motaung (2024), who showed that translanguaging fosters belonging and relational engagement, reducing the alienation often felt in monolingual academic spaces.

The third area of insight highlights the role of training. Tutors reported that introductory training provided useful strategies for incorporating students' home languages alongside English and for reflecting on their own practices. However, they also emphasised the need for more discipline-specific, in-depth training, as illustrated by T11's example of differences between EMS courses (where numbers are constant across languages) and theory-based subjects (where meaning can be more fluid). This echoes calls by García and Kleyn (2016) for teacher preparation that is tailored to specific disciplines and contexts.

Training was also experienced as a reflective space. T12 noted that it allowed her to reconsider her pedagogical approaches and identify ways to bridge language barriers effectively. This supports the findings of Canagarajah (2011) and Wei (2018), who argued that translanguaging pedagogy requires not only technical strategies but also a shift in educators' orientations toward language and identity.

In sum, the findings confirm and extend previous scholarship on translanguaging in higher education. They confirm earlier work showing that misconceptions about translanguaging (as requiring multilingual mastery) and the dominance of English remain barriers to its implementation. At the same time, they extend the literature by showing how the tutorial system—as a distinct pedagogical space—offers unique opportunities for translanguaging practices such as co-facilitation, multilingual planning, and creating inclusive learning environments. Finally, they highlight the importance of structured, faculty-specific training in embedding translanguaging pedagogy sustainably. By drawing attention to these dynamics, this study demonstrates how translanguaging tutorials can advance both access to learning and the recognition of identity—two principles that are central to inclusive higher education in multilingual contexts.

Conclusion

This paper examined tutors' attitudes towards the integration of translanguaging pedagogy into the tutorial system across different disciplines. The findings reveal that translanguaging pedagogy holds considerable promise in creating tutorial spaces that are more comfortable, inclusive, and participatory. Tutors indicated that enabling students to draw on their diverse linguistic repertoires not only enhanced comprehension of disciplinary content but also fostered a sense of belonging. Thus, the study affirms previous research showing that translanguaging pedagogy legitimises the multiple resources students bring into the classroom and disrupts monolingual norms that continue to dominate higher education (García, 2009; Makalela, 2015).

However, the findings also highlight enduring challenges. Tutors expressed concerns about their lack of proficiency in African languages and, in some cases, about their own limited competence in English. These perceptions reveal a misinterpretation of translanguaging as requiring mastery of all languages represented in the classroom when, in fact, the pedagogy positions tutors as facilitators of spaces where students themselves mobilise their repertoires. Such challenges were most evident in disciplinary contexts like law, where conceptual translation is complex and contested. These findings suggest that greater clarity and training are required if tutors are to move beyond deficit views of their own language knowledge towards embracing translanguaging as a practice of facilitation.

The study also demonstrated that tutors actively found ways to address these challenges. Co-facilitation emerged as an important strategy, where tutors were able to draw on one another's linguistic strengths to better support students. Equally, practices such as multilingual questioning and the deliberate use of icebreakers in different languages show how translanguaging can be

embedded into tutorial planning. Perhaps most importantly, tutors recognised that translanguaging transformed tutorials into comfortable and inclusive spaces, distinct from lecture halls where English-only practices prevail and student participation is often constrained. These findings align with recent studies that highlight translanguaging as a socially just pedagogy, capable of cultivating belonging and fostering student engagement in multilingual university classrooms (Motaung, 2024; Ramafikeng, 2024).

From a practical perspective, the study points to several areas that require strengthening. Tutor training emerged as foundational but currently insufficient because participants described it as providing only an introductory layer. While training helped tutors to reflect on their practices and experiment with strategies, they also called for deeper, discipline-specific preparation that would respond to the varied epistemological demands of different fields. Institutions therefore need to move beyond generic workshops towards structured, contextually relevant programmes that equip tutors to engage meaningfully with translanguaging pedagogy. Furthermore, the benefits of co-facilitation highlight the importance of institutional support for paired tutoring models that allow tutors to complement one another's linguistic strengths and expand students' access to learning.

Future research is also necessary to build on these insights. This study was based on a small cohort of 12 tutors at one institution, and further studies with larger and more diverse samples are required to capture broader trends. Mixed-method approaches would be especially useful to triangulate qualitative accounts with measurable data on student engagement, success, and retention. In addition, discipline-specific studies could provide greater insight into how translanguaging functions in areas such as law, economics, and professional programmes, where the translation of abstract or technical concepts presents unique challenges. Longitudinal studies could also assess the sustained impact of translanguaging tutorials on students' academic trajectories.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that translanguaging pedagogy offers a powerful means of transforming the tutorial system into a site of both access to learning and recognition of identity. Yet, for this potential to be fully realised, institutions must provide tutors with the resources, training, and structural support needed to implement translanguaging in systematic and sustainable ways. In so doing, tutorials can become not only supplementary spaces for learning but also central platforms for advancing epistemic justice in South African higher education.

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Reimagining Service-Learning for Generation Z: A Flexible Model for Higher Education[9]

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Abstract

Service-learning (SL) is a recognised form of experiential learning, of which the benefits for students' academic and personal growth are well researched. However, traditional SL models were developed without intentional regard to generational cohorts, and the advent of COVID-19 highlighted the lack of flexibility within these models. In this article, we explore how an existing SL model at a South African university of technology (UoT) can be adapted to align with Generation Z (Gen Z) students' learning preferences and where SL could be pursued during times of disruption. Purposive sampling was conducted to generate data from 43 Gen Z students who had participated in SL projects, and from seven SL lecturers who coordinated SL projects at this UoT. Semi-structured interviews, a focus group interview, and an online survey were administered to collect data. The findings reveal a Gen Z cohort profile of students who use multiple modes for learning and who are intrinsically motivated, hardworking, determined, compassionate, and technologically connected yet still value face-to-face contact. Regarding students' SL experiences in relation to Mezirow's transformative learning (TL) theory, they reported interacting with all phases of critical reflection and elements of rational discourse; however, action was limited. The findings aided in integrating Gen Z's learning needs directly into a flexible SL model that coalesced TL theory with the identified emergent themes. Enhanced by six strategic implementations, the new flexible model was integrated into the existing SL model employed at the UoT via four interlinked phases: pre-planning, collaborative planning, strategic implementation, and collaborative evaluation and reflection. The flexible model allows for adaptation to students' diverse learning preferences, evolving community needs, and sustainability in times of uncertainty.

Keywords: generational theory, adaptable pedagogy, experiential learning, COVID-19, higher education

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Introduction

Service-learning (SL) has long been positioned as a means of connecting higher education with communities, and integrating academic study with reciprocal service. Reciprocal SL refers to educational practices that link academic study with service in the community through relationships grounded in mutual benefit and reciprocity, from which the student and the community partner gain and, also contribute to the learning process (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Jacoby, 2015; Petersen & Osman, 2013).

However, the effectiveness of traditional SL models is being challenged by the emergence of Generation Z (Gen Z) students and events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. With an entire generation of students having grown up with digital technology, social media, and the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, their approach to learning is more diverse. Considering these contextual complexities, we raise an important pedagogical question: “How can a flexible SL model be developed that addresses Gen Z's learning preferences, characteristics, and SL experiences while remaining responsive to periods of disruption?”

In this article, we report on SL experiential pedagogy with Gen Z students attending a South African university of technology (UoT). SL has long been embedded in policy as part of South Africa’s approach to higher education. Following the introduction of South Africa’s first democratic policy on higher education in 1994, universities were encouraged to develop closer contact between universities and the community in ways that could contribute to nation-building and development (DoE, 1995; Petersen & Osman, 2013). Traditional models of SL have typically been implemented in ways that are both highly structured and dependent on in-person engagement (Laine, 2010). When COVID-19 struck, that rigidity became evident; SL programmes had to be cancelled or deferred (Pfeiffer et al., 2021; Tian & Noel, 2020), while reactive, virtual learning was adopted in the absence of planned adaptations (Grenier et al., 2020; Urias et al., 2024).

Compounding the above considerations was a shift in generations from Gen Y to Gen Z. Generational theory proposes that formative experiences within a given culture and time have a greater impact on a person’s core beliefs than geographic location or socio-economic standing in society (Codrington & Marshall, 2012; Strauss & Howe, 1991). This has important considerations for SL design because the present generation of university students, Gen Z, born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2016), came of age during the rapid proliferation of technology (Alruthaya et al., 2021) and thus have embedded assumptions about technology and access. A gap exists in research on how SL models align with Gen Z learning preferences, particularly in the South African context, where this cohort remains underexplored in SL literature (Swanzen, 2018). In this article, we address that gap by constructing a Gen Z student profile and using it to inform the adaptation of an existing SL model at this UoT.

Background to the Study

In South Africa, SL was integrated into policy on higher education after 1994 to link curriculum and community to achieve national development objectives (Department of Education, 1997; Petersen & Osman, 2013). Petersen and Osman (2013, p. 7) stated that SL is "an educational experience that allows students to learn from active involvement in organised service activity that aims to meet communities' needs through reciprocity, collaboration and structured reflection" integrated with the academic curriculum. To this end, South African higher education institutions have developed a structured format to operationalise SL within the curriculum and community.

The Community Higher Education-Service Partnerships initiative established a tripartite partnership among universities, communities, and service providers (Mouton & Wildschut, 2005). Studies report that SL supports students' learning outcomes, strengthens civic engagement (Eyler, 2000; Osman & Castle, 2006; Rutti et al., 2016), and advances students' critical thinking, personal growth, and sense of social responsibility (Afzal & Hussain, 2020; Eyler & Giles, 1999).

In South Africa, Gen Z students are referred to as the "born frees" who were born into a post-apartheid world marked by economic instability, uncertainty, and protest (Langa, 2017). Studies show that not all students within this cohort have been afforded the same access to digital tools as students in more

developed countries, highlighting the importance of selecting accessible, low-barrier technologies that promote inclusive participation in SL projects (Kele & Mzileni, 2021; Swanzen, 2018). This points to intra-generational diversity within the Gen Z cohort at this UoT (Swanzen, 2018). Although generational theory provides a useful lens for identifying shared formative experiences, it has been criticised for flattening differences within cohorts and for treating generations as uniform groups (Rudolph et al., 2021).

In the South African context, these differences are shaped by socio-economic standing, geography, and schooling background, which produce uneven access to technology, stable internet connectivity, and digital exposure. In turn, the flexible SL model acknowledges this by allowing tools and strategies to be substituted or adapted according to context, so that SL projects continue where access is limited, and by drawing on universal design for learning (UDL) principles to accommodate varied resource allocations and learning preferences within the same cohort. Additionally, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic intensified the need for the UoT to adapt pedagogical practices, prompting it to assess the suitability of the current SL models.

SL models such as the 8-block model (Laine, 2010) and the preparation, action, reflection, and evaluation model (University of Maryland, 1998) emphasised this structured, hands-on approach to experiential learning. However, while these models are effective under stable conditions, their structural elements tend to limit the flexibility of SL models, specifically in contexts that require diverse means of engagement. However, the decisions were reactionary responses to the pandemic rather than SL implementations with flexibility embedded into their design. We position the article at this junction by integrating digital platforms into SL, supported by an institution, to enhance collaboration and sustain meaningful connections across in-person and remote learning contexts. Additionally, these platforms support continuity in community partnerships when direct contact is limited.

Because digital technology and smartphones became widely available before these students were born, Gen Z has never known life without the internet (Twenge, 2017). Studies have shown that Gen Z learners thrive with multimodal instruction and application of learning. This means that they draw on multiple ways of learning, such as visual, kinaesthetic, and hands-on forms of learning that allow students to see how their course content relates to real-world issues (Rothman, 2016; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). To this end, for example, UDL is a set of flexible principles that could guide educators in designing inclusive learning experiences. Instruction based on UDL incorporates multiple means of engaging with content, learning activities, and demonstrating knowledge, inclusive of varying learning preferences, learning abilities and disabilities, and resource limitations. This framework allows learners to access information and learning materials in a way that supports their strengths while allowing them to show what they know in a way that aligns with their preferred learning preferences (CAST, 2018). Within SL, UDL can be integrated into the design of learning activities so that students and community partners engage in projects using their strengths by accessing content and demonstrating their learning in ways that reflect their diverse learning preferences.

Research on Gen Z students shows that they prefer having a choice in when and how they learn, with technology as the main tool enabling that flexibility, providing instant feedback and real-world problem-solving (Barnes & Noble College, 2018; Means et al., 2009). Besides integrating technology into SL design, gamification has been used to boost ongoing engagement with learning activities. Gamification, or adding game elements into non-game contexts, has helped educators create a sense of continuity and visibility for students working on long-term projects. Elements included in coursework ranges from checkpoints, digital badges, and progress bars that enable students to monitor their progress (Deterding et al., 2011; Hamari et al., 2014). When preparing materials for Gen Z learners, gamification can help foster their need for achievement while satisfying their desire for social connection in learning environments (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Gamification used in SL projects can help students feel a sense of progress and purpose, while also building community within their project teams.

Theoretical Framework

Philosophical Underpinnings of SL: Dewey's Experiential Learning

The theoretical foundations of SL can be traced to Dewey (1916, 1933, 1938) and Freire (1972), who emphasised the importance of experience, reflection, and social action in education. While Freire focused on political transformation through literacy and collective action, this study is more aligned with Dewey's framework. Considered by researchers to be a seminal figure in SL (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Hatcher & Erasmus, 2008), Dewey (1938) argued that education should be focused on preparing students to contribute meaningfully to a democratic society where individuals are treated equally, regardless of race, class, or gender. Dewey's work has impacted SL in five key areas: experience, democratic community, social service, reflective inquiry, and educational transformation (Saltmarsh, 1996).

Continuity and interaction are the central elements of Dewey's (Dewey, 1916, 1938) theory. Continuity means that previous experiences influence future experiences. In SL, students apply academic knowledge as well as knowledge from past experiences to their projects. This accumulated experience can deepen their participation while developing reflection and learning from new experiences. The principle of interaction connects students to the subject content and the service environment. Dewey emphasised that learning is not passive reception but the active creation of meaning through engagement with real-world experiences. Continuity and interaction create opportunities for transformation to occur through providing students with real-world contexts. Authentic contexts allow students to apply what they have learnt to real-world problems, and to reflect on their experiences while engaging in a reciprocal relationship in communities (Deans, 1999; Dewey, 1938; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). Dewey's focus on democracy, critical reflection, and learning through doing provides a structured lens for understanding SL as a pedagogy. The development of the flexible SL model outlined in this article is supported by Dewey's principles through the endorsement of collaborative learning, critical thinking, and reflection. This alignment is suited for Gen Z students whose learning preferences tend to lean towards meaningful engagement, teamwork, and hands-on application (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Thejovathi & Krishnan, 2020).

Grounded in Dewey's (1916, 1933, 1938) experiential framework, this study draws on Mezirow's (1990, 1991) transformative learning (TL) theory as the theoretical lens to explore how learning within SL produces perspective transformation. TL theory posits that individuals undergo perspective transformations in their beliefs, worldviews, and assumptions when they encounter disorienting dilemmas. TL does not overtly include experiential learning; however, transformation can be triggered by authentic, real-world experiences, which is a hallmark of SL. SL allows students to learn through real-world, hands-on experience in communities, allowing for transformation to occur. Thus, SL experiences have the potential to create conditions for deep intellectual and personal growth (Choi et al., 2023; Eyler & Giles, 1999), which foregrounds the alignment between SL and TL theory. For example, research participants experience growth in critical thinking skills, awareness of social issues, and problem-solving, which are outcomes that closely mirror the attributes of TL.

TL Theory

TL focuses on personal transformation, defined as changes in how individuals think about their beliefs, values, and worldview (Mezirow, 1991). Reflection allows individuals to trigger new points of view and prompts them to question their beliefs and assumptions (Mezirow, 1990). SL focuses on students reflecting on their experiences to find meaning in their learning. TL theory centres on the idea of personal growth; therefore, it serves as an appropriate lens for this article.

Mezirow (1991) described 10 phases of perspective transformation, which is a deep, critical reflection on established assumptions that can lead to a more inclusive and discriminating understanding of one's experiences. However, Kitchenham (2008) narrowed down Mezirow's 10 phases to four, namely (1) disorienting dilemmas, (2) reflecting, (3) rational discourse, and (4) acting on the new perspective. These four phases of SL serve as a lens to understand how students who participated in SL purportedly

transitioned through the stages of TL (Kitchenham, 2008). Beyond its analytical function, TL theory also informs the design of the flexible SL model presented in this article, particularly the transformative learning review (TLR) guide, which is structured around the four phases to recognise and scaffold TL during evaluation.

Research on TL is prolific (Cranton, 2016; Dirkx, 2012; Taylor, 2007). However, recent work by Hoggan (2020) and Hoggan and Higgins (2023) challenged TL as being considered one large theory. Instead, Hoggan and Higgins argued that TL should be reconceptualised as a metatheory, or umbrella term, that incorporates a variety of theories related to human transformation as it occurs through learning. This study draws specifically on Mezirow's (1991) theory of perspective of transformation as a lens to examine transformative shifts in Gen Z students participating in SL projects.

Methodology

The pragmatic paradigm served as the underpinning of the study. Pragmatism values practical inquiry and is flexible, focusing on what works while responding to real-world issues (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). It was selected because we required both qualitative and quantitative methods to address a complex, real-world educational problem, and pragmatism supports the use of multiple methods without being bound to a single epistemological position (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Morgan, 2007).

Qualitative and quantitative methods were combined to enable triangulation and corroboration of interpretation (Creswell & Garrett, 2008; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The study was conceptualised as an instrumental case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995), in which the case was used to explore the broader educational question: "How can a flexible SL model be developed that responds to the learning preferences and characteristics of Gen Z students?" The bounded system of this case (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003) comprised a specific group of Gen Z students drawn from various faculties at a single South African UoT defined by their generational cohort, their participation in SL projects, and the contextual disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The case-study design was appropriate because we focused on understanding a real-life phenomenon within the institutional context (Yin, 2003).

The study site was selected for its established SL structures as reflected in its Vision 2030 plan (Cape Peninsula University of Technology, 2021). Research participants were drawn from SL projects recommended by the institutional Community Engagement Manager. Non-probability purposive sampling was used, with inclusion criteria comprising Gen Z students who had participated in SL within the previous two years and SL lecturers who had implemented SL projects with Gen Z students (Acharya et al., 2013; Ali, 2020). Snowball sampling supported student participant recruitment in the early stages of data collection, where low response rates were linked to COVID-19 restrictions (Noy, 2008). Data saturation was reached with 43 Gen Z students and seven SL lecturers.

Three instruments were used for data collection. Seven Gen Z students participated in the semi-structured interviews, of which five were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, and two were conducted face-to-face at the study site, as allowed by COVID-19 restrictions. With the interview questions, we explored learning preferences, characteristics, motivations to learn, and students' SL experiences. The semi-structured interview questions with their responses were audio-recorded and transcribed. The participants checked the transcriptions for accuracy (Bailie, 2020; Rabionet, 2011). Thirty-seven students, excluding the students who were interviewed, completed the online questionnaire, which was adapted from Seemiller and Grace's (2016) questionnaire using Google Forms. The survey questions included both open-ended and closed questions. Questions were piloted with nine students to determine the clarity of the questions before the questionnaire was forwarded to the survey participants (Kelley et al., 2003). Seven SL lecturers participated in an online focus group interview to share their observations on how Gen Z students approached learning and interacted with SL. The purpose of the study was shared with all the research participants. Participation was voluntary, responses were anonymous, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Given the COVID-19 restrictions, consent was obtained via

email or verbally through MS Teams (Jardine & James, 2012). Ethics approval to conduct the study was obtained from the institution, and all ethics protocols were followed.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data generated from the semi-structured interviews and the focus group interview. Survey data were analysed separately using a descriptive coding approach. The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-phase framework, including familiarisation with the data, coding, searching for categories, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. In the analysis, we focused on semantic themes, staying close to how participants expressed themselves, while also attending to underlying meanings in their accounts of SL experiences and learning preferences.

For the analysis, we drew on inductive and deductive coding methods as presented by Fereday and Cochrane (2006) and Medelyan (2023). Deductive coding began with predefined codes aligned to the research questions, with key concepts of Gen Z learning preferences, characteristics, and SL experiences forming the initial coding framework. Inductive coding was also used, allowing new codes and themes to emerge from the data without being confined to the initial framework.

Transcripts from the semi-structured interviews and focus group were imported into NVivo 14 to support systematic coding (Dhakal, 2022; Zamawe, 2015). Following first-level coding, codes were exported to Microsoft Word for manual review. During this stage, codes were re-examined, interrelated patterns were identified, and codes with similar meanings were grouped. Colour coding was used to support visual clustering, for example, blue for learning approaches and green for SL experiences. These grouped codes were then again imported into NVivo 14, where codes with shared characteristics were clustered into categories, and themes were developed across categories. This process resulted in 24 codes from the semi-structured interview data, which were arranged into 13 categories and four themes.

The open-ended survey responses were analysed using descriptive coding. Responses were grouped by content similarity and assigned codes based on specific survey questions. These codes were then analysed for frequency to identify recurring patterns across the dataset. Closed-ended survey responses were exported and represented graphically as percentages to show the distribution of responses across items.

Findings and Discussion

From the findings, we created a profile of the Gen Z student cohort whose characteristics, learning preferences, and SL experiences informed the flexible SL model. The profile focuses on four interconnected dimensions: learning styles and preferences, personal characteristics and motivation, TL patterns, and students' visions for future SL engagement.

The Gen Z students in this cohort did not adhere to one learning style across SL and other learning contexts. Students used visual, kinaesthetic, linguistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal strategies interchangeably depending on the activity and learning context. Interview data and survey responses reveal that learning styles were fluid and context-dependent. Interview Participant 2 captured this adaptability clearly by noting:

> I learn best by. . . a bit of everything, because I like to write the stuff down, make my own notes . . . so I can understand and visualise my notes, my understanding of the topic. I also like to practice . . . I am also hands-on.

Students noted that they preferred different learning environments as well. For example, certain students appreciated the physical classroom spaces to have direct access to peers and SL lecturers, while other students preferred to learn remotely to learn alone or in a hybrid format that allowed them more flexibility. These preferences appeared to depend on factors such as direct engagement and flexibility. These findings suggest that SL models relying on fixed modes of delivery may not fully support the learning preferences of Gen Z students. The data points suggest a preference for flexibility in how students engage in SL projects. These findings informed the flexible SL model by including multiple ways of engagement, hybrid learning formats, and flexible reflective practices.

In the semi-structured interviews and the survey data, this cohort consistently described themselves as hardworking, determined, and compassionate. In the interviews, Participant 4 stated that "Once I put my mind to something, I want to complete it," while Participant 3 reflected that "I think I am a caring person, very giving, and understanding." Survey findings supported these self-descriptions, with most students identifying as responsible, loyal, open-minded, optimistic, communicative, compassionate, organised, creative, and practical. Focus group observations from SL lecturers aligned with this, noting that students were "self-sufficient," showed "patience and determination," and were invested in their work.

Students linked their academic engagement to personal growth, family upliftment, and helping others. Participant 2 explained: "What motivates me is just wanting more out of my life for myself, and for my family and also to do better." Most of the survey respondents preferred intrinsic motivators such as personal improvement, dedication, and self-satisfaction over recognition by others. The participants identified with intrinsic motivations and a sense of purpose, which may aid long-term involvement in SL.

WhatsApp was found to be the most used platform among participants in all three data sets. Students spent between four and eight hours daily on social media, most of which was spent on WhatsApp for academic and social interaction. Participant 5 noted: "WhatsApp for messages or phone calls and then Outlook email supplied to us by the university." Focus group observations confirmed that WhatsApp was actively used within SL projects, with one SL lecturer observing: "They would create groups on their own, WhatsApp groups . . . and they would share resources, and they would be assisting each other."

Despite high engagement with digital forms of communication, students reported face-to-face communication as one of their preferred methods of communication. Students seemed to appreciate digital connection but prioritised human connection when forming relationships and for learning. Therefore, purposeful digital in-person engagement informed the flexible SL model and its honouring of virtual and physical presence.

TL Patterns Within SL

TL theory was used as a lens to explore how students experienced learning within SL. The purpose was not to re-theorise TL but to identify which phases were evident in the data and how these patterns could be included in the flexible SL model. Students consistently described how they experienced deep personal reflection across interview and survey data. Participant 2 stated:

> Because at the end of the day you are not the same person at the end of your service learning as you were in the beginning . . . because you go in with certain expectations, with a certain mind-set, et cetera. And then at the end of your service learning you learned something. You are taking something with you when you're ending your service learning.

Survey responses reinforced this pattern:

> Service learning has helped me as a student reflect on my experiences and build critical thinking abilities, such as the capacity to connect seemingly unrelated aspects of an event in meaningful ways and the capacity to look for patterns and deep meaning in facts.

These findings indicate that students engaged meaningfully in reflective processes, often re-evaluating prior assumptions about teaching, inequality, and their own roles. Reflection emerged as a clear strength of existing SL practice. The flexible model retains structured reflection as a central component, while formalising it through the TLR guide.

Rational Discourse as Dialogical Learning

Students also described learning through dialogue with peers and community members. Participant 4 reflected:

> Having to see the different perspectives and opinions and thinking about a certain topic where I just come with my assumptions, and then I would be able to see no, but it is not so, it's the other way around.

Survey data similarly show that dialogue shifted perspectives: "Yes, because I learned a lot from them [the community] . . . They helped me see things from a new perspective than I previously did."

Rational discourse functioned as a critical element of meaning-making within SL. The flexible model, therefore, intentionally incorporates structured opportunities for dialogue, including peer discussion, community collaboration, and guided debriefing, rather than treating communication as incidental to project completion.

Limited Evidence of Sustained Action

Reflection and dialogue were strongly evident, but fewer students were able to translate this to action arising from their transformed perspectives. More commonly, students described increased awareness, as one respondent noted: "I became more aware of my surroundings and the issues that other people in my community are facing." This gap between internal transformation and concrete action directly informed the development of the flexible model. The TLR guide was created to support progression from reflection and dialogue towards intentional action planning, making the action phase more explicit within SL design.

Students' Visions for Future SL Engagement

In this theme, we captured Gen Z students' vision of desirable SL in the future. Trends in students' aspirations and an understanding of how they shaped the flexible SL model were evident. Students frequently mentioned wanting to solve social issues on a larger scale to make an impact. Participant 5 defined SL as mobilising change:

> I think that this generation is already quite understandable—what's happening in the community, and I think service-learning could help them show that or help them move forward into making a difference, making a change.

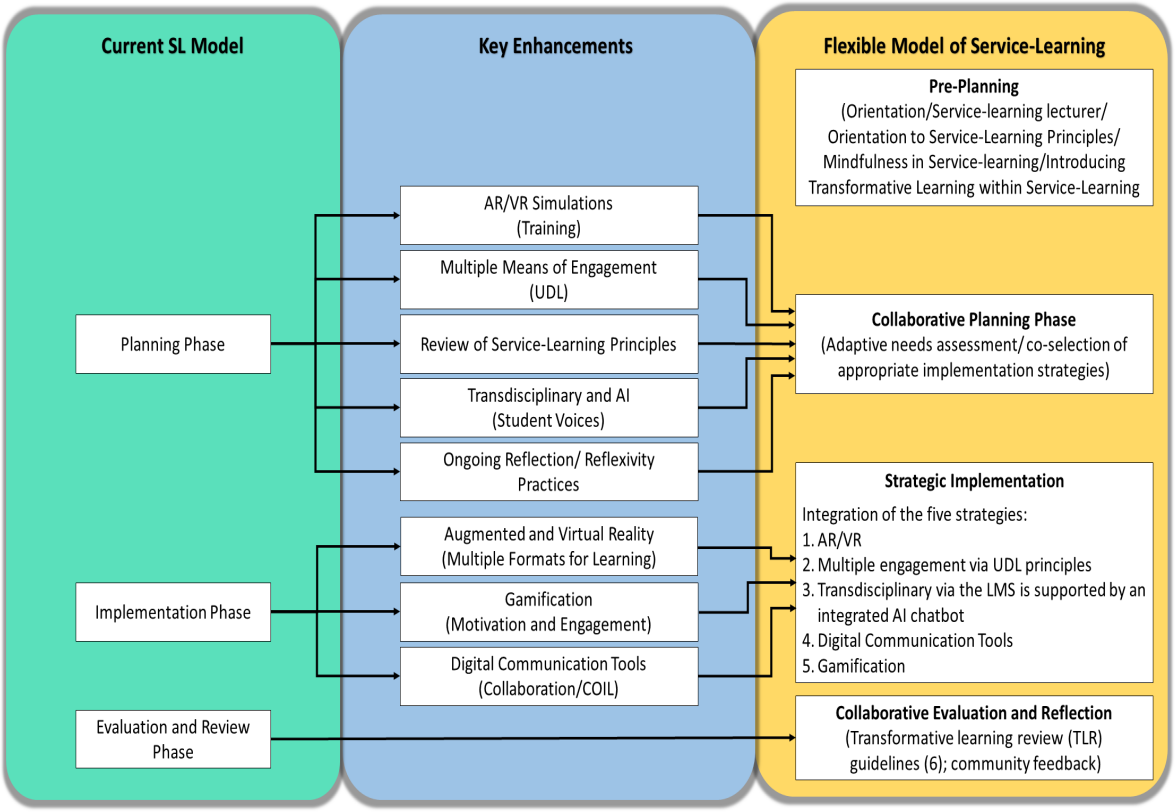
Survey responses reflected similar orientations, with students highlighting concerns ranging from illiteracy and poverty to environmental sustainability. These responses indicate that students recognised complex social and environmental challenges and wanted to contribute to long-term change rather than short-term volunteering. While individual references to reciprocal learning were present, students' framing positioned SL primarily as a vehicle for social intervention. This tendency toward unilateral interpretations of service, centred on what students could give rather than what communities and students could mutually exchange, revealed a gap in how reciprocity was understood. This tension between activist aspiration and reciprocal learning informed the conceptual direction of the flexible SL model.

A Flexible Model of SL

Drawing on the findings presented above, we present a flexible SL model designed for Gen Z students at a UoT (see Figure 1). The model emerged from patterns identified across the four dimensions of the student profile and is structured around four interlinked phases and six key implementation strategies that strengthen flexibility and alignment with Gen Z's learning preferences, characteristics, and SL experiences. Grounded in empirical data and informed by TL theory, the model provides a practical and adaptable approach for SL lecturers aiming to design meaningful and student-centred SL experiences for the current Gen Z cohort.

Figure 1

A Flexible SL Model for Gen Z Students (Adapted From the Institutional Model)



As seen in Figure 1, the flexible model is structured around four interlinked phases, with six enhancement strategies embedded across them: (1) multimodal engagement (AR/VR), (2) UDL, (3) transdisciplinary coordination through an AI-assisted SL hub, (4) LMS-based digital infrastructure, (5) gamification and sustained digital engagement, and (6), the TLR guide. Each strategy is positioned within the phase where it is most active, while remaining connected to the full cycle.

Phase 1: Pre-Planning Phase

The pre-planning phase was introduced because the findings show that Gen Z students entered SL projects with varied assumptions and limited familiarity with reciprocal SL principles. This phase is to orient students to three areas: the reciprocal foundations of SL, the digital tools that support project delivery, and the reflective and transformative expectations of SL engagement. This prepares students before co-designing begins and sets conditions for reflexivity identified as essential for transformative learning.

Phase 2: Collaborative Planning Phase

Phase 2 centres on co-designing the project. While SL lecturers provide an open-ended brief outlining educational purpose and ethical guidelines, the project itself is planned collaboratively with students and community partners. This reflects the finding that Gen Z students were most intrinsically motivated when they experienced ownership of the work. A flexible needs assessment drives project aims, strategy selection, and choice of digital tool. Community partners clarify project priorities and long-term goals to ensure that the project is community-ready before implementation begins.

Phase 3: Strategic Implementation Phase

Phase 3 is where the six enhancement strategies are most actively employed. They are not applied in a fixed order but are adapted to the demands of the project and the needs of students and community partners.

Multimodal Engagement and Flexible Participation

Gen Z students used visual, hands-on, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and linguistic approaches interchangeably depending on the task. For this reason, it is preferable that the SL design is not approached through one experiential pathway. At the experiential level, simulation tools such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR) or structured scenario activities can be introduced during planning to help students and community partners to envisage project contexts, identify assumptions, and anticipate challenges before going into the communities. At the participatory level, UDL principles allow multiple means of engagement or action and expression so that students and community partners may participate by applying their strengths. Combined, these two responses deepen access, reciprocity, and meaning-making reflective practice within SL.

Transdisciplinary Coordination

The findings show that Gen Z students wanted SL to be more purposeful and aligned with real-world social issues. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed weaknesses in coordination when working face-to-face in the communities. A flexible SL model, therefore, requires a digital coordination backbone that builds relevance, supports transdisciplinary work, and creates resilience during disruption. The digital coordination could be via a university-wide SL hub within the learner management system (LMS), where all institutional SL projects are made available to students across faculties. This may be facilitated by using platforms like Blackboard or Moodle. The use of an AI-assisted navigation tool would allow students to find projects based on their disciplinary background, social interests, and availability. However, placements would only be confirmed once SL lecturers have verified alignment with module criteria and ethical considerations. This addition to the flexible SL model encourages transdisciplinary collaboration by connecting students across faculties, and supports project continuity during disruption because coordination, documentation, and communication all take place in one digital space. Community partners set their own priorities and long-term goals during planning, keeping reciprocity and shared ownership at the core of the model.

Sustained Engagement

Gen Z students described motivation in terms of purpose, growth, and commitment rather than extrinsic rewards. Maintaining this intrinsic motivation throughout longer SL projects requires intentional structure and scaffolding. The flexible model includes milestone progression with a digital workspace. Gamification, in this context, does not refer to competition; instead, it means making the stages of SL more visible. Once a stage in the SL cycle is complete, students view their progress in a common workspace, and community partners can assess their position in the SL cycle. Institutionally supported digital tools, such as shared notebooks, message boards, and collaborative document repositories, allow students to learn synchronously or asynchronously, which allows SL projects to continue when face-to-face engagement is challenging. The continued rhythm of action, documentation, and reflection reinforces the transformative dimension of SL by allowing space for reflection to deepen rather than to remain episodic.

The implementation of all three strategies depends on institutional capacity, community access, and available technology. Where immersive or AI-assisted tools are not available, simpler alternatives such as scenario analysis, role-play, manual project matching, or physical milestone trackers can serve the same purpose: flexibility and accessibility taking precedence over specific platforms. The strategies are adaptable rather than static, selecting and scaling tools according to context while maintaining the core values of multimodal engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and sustained student motivation.

Phase 4: Collaborative Evaluation and Reflection

Phase 4 closes the model cycle but feeds back into pre-planning for the next cycle, reinforcing the iterative design of the model. Two components guide this phase: the TLR guide, and structured community involvement in evaluation.

TLR

The integration of the TLR guide into the flexible SL model relates to the finding that students not only engage in descriptive reflection but also engage in deeper premise reflection and rational dialogue. Both are indicative of Mezirow's (1990, 1991) conception of transformative learning. The TLR provides a structured, yet flexible guide created around four dimensions: disorienting experience, critical reflection, rational discourse, and evidence of action. Student reflections are analysed for indicators of transformative learning, including expressions of discomfort or challenged assumptions, evidence of shifts in beliefs and positionality, engagement in structured dialogue with peers and community partners, and action taken in response to these perspective changes. However, students might not reach the action stage within a single SL cycle—but the TLR provides emerging signs of civic growth. The TLR does not prescribe specific assessment formats such as portfolios, journals, multimedia reflections, or oral presentations because the focus is on depth of perspective change, not format. Community partners are encouraged to be actively involved in Phase 4, providing feedback on the appropriateness, respect, and sustainability of the project through debriefing or focus groups. This sustained engagement of all SL participants engenders shared responsibility for the success of the project and acknowledges the community as partners in the transformative process.

Conclusion

SL models developed without purposeful consideration of generational cohorts risk misalignment with the students they aim to serve. This issue was addressed by creating an empirically grounded profile of Gen Z students at a South African UoT, and using the profile to modify an existing SL model into one that is adaptable, digitally responsive, and pedagogically inclusive. The profile describes a cohort of students who use multiple modes for learning and who are intrinsically motivated, compassionate, and technologically connected, yet continue to value face-to-face interaction.

Existing SL literature in the South African context often discusses Gen Z in relation to the pandemic or technology adoption, broadly. This study offers a context-specific profile that could serve as a foundation for further research on Gen Z students in South African higher education given that this cohort remains underexplored in SL literature. The adaptable model does not replace in-person SL but enhances it by embedding six strategies across four phases that respond directly to the empirical profile. Augmented reality or VR, and UDL address multimodal learning preferences. Gamification and digital communication tools maintain motivation and ensure continuity during disruptions. Transdisciplinary coordination via the LMS increases real-world relevance and gives students a stronger voice in selecting projects with genuine community significance. A notable theoretical finding was that students demonstrated internal transformation, including growth in empathy, critical awareness, and perspective shifts, yet showed no evidence of acting on these changes during the SL projects. Although Mezirow (1991) acknowledged that action may not immediately follow perspective transformation, the lack of structured support for this transition is a shortcoming in current SL design. The TLR guide responds by operationalising Mezirow's four phases as observable, scaffolded measures rather than assuming that transformation will occur spontaneously.

We acknowledge certain limitations of the study alongside its contributions. The study was conducted at a single UoT during the COVID-19 pandemic, which influenced both the data collected and the model's design priorities. The sample was drawn from a single institutional context, restricting the extent to which the Gen Z profile can be generalised to other settings. Future research should pilot and evaluate the model

against traditional SL approaches to assess its relative effectiveness for students and community partners. Longitudinal studies tracking whether the TLR guide results in measurable changes in perspective transformation over time would strengthen its theoretical contribution. Extending the research on flexible SL models across higher education institutions would test the model's scalability as Generation Alpha transitions into higher education and SL pedagogy practices continue to evolve.

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From Rationality to Criticality: Reorienting Policy Research for Inclusive Education in Malawi

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Abstract

This policy analysis study examines how education policy research has been framed in recent decades, and its implications for inclusive education. The study draws on Ball's (1993) conceptualisation of policy effects, which distinguishes between first-order effects that focus on policy outcomes and evaluation, and second-order effects that address unintended consequences and foundational assumptions. Policy research focused on first-order effects takes a rationalist approach, while policy research manifested in second-order effects takes a critical approach. Rationalist approaches, which prioritise evidence and evaluation, have dominated education policy research but fail to challenge the underlying logic of policy frameworks. In contrast, critical policy analysis approaches emphasise problematisation rather than problem-solving. To illustrate this situation, this study employs Bacchi's (2009) problematisation theory and "What's the Problem Represented to Be" methodological approach to analyse the inclusive education policy for Malawi. The critical policy analysis asks key questions about problem representation, manifestation, and reframing. The study argues that taking a rationalist approach to analyse policy frameworks leads to constructing inclusive education as a solvable issue rather than a complex socio-political challenge. The study demonstrates how rationalist assumptions obscure deeper systemic inequities and advocates dialectical or transformative policy research approaches that centre learners, teachers, and their ecosystems. The study concludes that reorienting education policy research towards critical perspectives can help to inform and promote more equitable and inclusive education systems.

Keywords: critical policy analysis, education policy, inclusive education, policy evaluation, problematisation

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Introduction

Stacey and Mockler (2024a) elaborated on a position that Ball (1993) first made that the effects of a policy are at two levels. The first level is called *first-order effects of policy*, focusing on "what is intended to do and whether or not it achieves this" (Stacey & Mockler, 2024a, p. 7). Policy research that has taken this focus is considered rationalist, evidence-based, or evaluation-focused. The second level is called *second-order effects of policy*, focusing on "potentially unanticipated ramifications—or indeed questioning the underlying logic and rationale of such shifts" (Stacey & Mockler, 2024a, p. 7). Policy research focused on such effects adopts critical policy research approaches. The policy researchers oriented in the first-order effects framing have adopted research designs and approaches that seek to evaluate the impact of the policies in order to give evidence as to what works and what does not. This focus is also important to such researchers because policymakers tend to prefer policy research that speaks to the first-order effects. After all, policy has been seen as a way to structure and inform practices. Often, the sponsors of these research processes emphasise rationality, evidence, and evaluation. Policy analysis research that takes rationalist approaches forgets that the purpose of a policy is not to give solutions to problems. This reorientation is where the second-order effects framing comes in. Policy research framed in the second-order effects looks beyond what the policy can do and whether it has done it. Thus, policy researchers informed by the second-order effects go for the critical policy analysis approaches because "the task of critical policy analysis is one of problematising rather than problem-solving" (Stacey & Mockler, 2024b, p. 257).

This study argues that policy research of the past few decades has failed to inform and change the education systems because it has taken rationalist approaches that seek to show the impact of the policy. This study demonstrates that if policy research is approached from dialectical perspectives, education systems can be enriched with dispositions aimed at transformation and change. Thus, policy research needs to adopt critical policy analysis approaches in which the intention is not only to speak back to the policymakers and sponsors, as in the rationalist approach, but also to look at the value of the agenda that the policy puts forward. This approach entails that the primary feeders of the policy in critical policy research are learners, teachers, and the ecosystems around them. The study demonstrates this argument through a critical policy analysis of the inclusive education policy for Malawi.[10] The study responds to the following research questions:

1. How is inclusive education represented as a "problem" in education policy research and policy frameworks, and what underlying rationalist assumptions shape this representation?

2. How has the rationalist framing of inclusive education policy emerged and been sustained in education policy research, and what dimensions of inequality does it leave unexamined?

3. What critical or transformative framings of inclusive education can challenge rationalist approaches, and how might these reframings better support more inclusive education systems?

Literature Review

[10] Malawi finalised drafting its National Inclusive Education Policy in 2023 (Ministry of Education, 2023). However, it seems roll-out has been delayed although the policy was shared with stakeholders. Often, researchers wait for a policy to be implemented and then come in to evaluate its impact. Here, this study takes a different view through a critical approach. The study engages with this final draft policy document in order to help its anticipated roll-out and also, to put forward an argument on how the policy can be researched so that such research is designed towards policy improvements for implementation rather than report-backs. Therefore, the final rolled-out policy document may differ slightly in terms of aspects such as dates and page numbers from those reported in this study but the arguments made here would remain the same.

What is Education Policy?

Before we define education policy, the starting point should be: "What is policy?" This question may sound simple and irrelevant, but it has implications for shaping practices. There have been many contemplations on the meaning of "policy." Is it a written document? What about verbal instructions given for people to follow? Do such qualify as policy? Here, there is a need to return to the celebrated policy theorist, Stephen Ball (1993, p. 10) who observed:

> One of the conceptual problems currently lurking within policy research and policy sociology is that more often than not analysts fail to define conceptually what they mean by policy. The meaning of policy is taken for granted and theoretical and epistemological dry rot is built into the analytical structures they build. It is not difficult to find the term policy being used to describe very different "things" at different points in the same study. For me, much rests on the meaning or possible meanings that we give to policy; it affects "how" we research and how we interpret what we find.

In furthering the observation above, Ball noted that a policy can be both a text and a discourse. This definition is expanded later in the theoretical framework. Ball emphasised that policy is not just a thing, as it has been hegemonically perceived. Instead, we can think of policy as processes and outcomes (Ball, 1993). To escape the trap of defining a policy as a thing, perhaps we need to go back to before Ball. We must look at David Easton's (1953) ideas on what constitutes a policy. Mockler and Stacey (2024) precisely captured Easton's policy intuitions. Thus, we can think of a policy as an "authoritative allocation of values" (Easton, 1953, p. 129). Here, we get three keywords of what a policy is. A policy has authority. It allocates. Moreover, it defines values. We may go round and around to try to explain what these keywords mean, but they may not make much sense if they are not contextualised in practice. Thus, let us return to education.

So, what is education policy? Of course, if we have to define what education policy is, we need to be reminded of what Ball said so that we do not conceptually fail to define what policy is. Equally, we must be reminded that a policy is beyond being a thing to include processes and outcomes (Ball, 1993) and authority, allocation, and values (Easton, 1953). Then, we can recontextualise and conceptualise these into the education policy framing. We can now consider Stacey and Mockler's (2024a, p. 6) definition of education policy, namely, that education policy may mean "'official' documents produced by governments and other educational institutions, which position educational issues in ways that reflect particular values and which can have a range of 'effects.'" Into this definition, Ball's and Easton's propositions are incorporated. We see processes (produced by), outcomes (a range of effects), authority (official), allocation (position educational issues), and values (particular values). The study applies this definition of education policy in the context of inclusive education in Malawi.

Inclusive Education: Research, Policy, and Practice

The illustration of the education policy in this study is through an inclusive education focus. Inclusive education has been extensively defined as an educational system in which all learners, regardless of any discriminating factors such as disabilities, race, ethnicity, and language, are educated in the same learning environments with equal educational opportunities and where necessary, support is afforded (Slee, 2018). Thus, the study focuses on how education policy frames inclusive education, and how adopting a critical policy research approach enables problematising inclusive education and surfaces unintended effects of the policy that otherwise remain overlooked through rationalist approaches. Many studies have focused on inclusive education policy analysis globally and in Southern Africa. A good example from the southern African region is the recent extensive study by de Souza et al. (2024), which covered inclusive education policy analysis of 11 countries using a critical policy analysis approach. The study's findings agree with Stacey and Mockler (2024a, p. 5) that "the question of 'implementation' or enactment is also important, as policy may only really take shape (or not) 'on the ground.'"

We cannot talk of inclusive education from any geographical location without mentioning the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 1994). Of course, we must acknowledge that efforts for inclusive education started long before the Salamanca Statement, but its inception gave a global perspective on inclusive education. We can confidently claim that inclusive education, as conceptualised globally, finds its roots in the Salamanca Statement, which emphasises that all learners, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, or emotional capabilities, should be educated and supported in mainstream schools (Chataika et al., 2012). The influence of the Salamanca Statement on countries' move towards inclusive education is well documented. It is almost redundant to repeat these developments here. Examples of such documentation can be seen in many publications (e.g. Ainscow et al., 2019; Hernández-Torrano et al., 2022; Hunt, 2011; Snoddon & Murray, 2019; Tarantino et al., 2023). The consensus in these publications was that the Salamanca Statement has been instrumental in transforming mainstream schooling systems towards inclusivity. So, maybe the important task here is to pay attention to the developments in Malawi, the context of this study, where equal educational opportunities remain elusive.

In Malawi, the Salamanca Statement and other international protocols on inclusive education have been instrumental in shaping inclusive education research, policy, and practice. Kamchedzera (2015a) highlighted that Malawi's education system has consistently faced challenges in providing access and retention across educational levels, particularly in tertiary institutions. The National Education Sector Investment Plan (NESIP) stressed that implementing inclusive education is non-negotiable to ensure that no learner is left behind (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). Yet, evidence from the Education Management Information System indicates that learners with special needs comprise only a fraction of total enrolments, underlining an implementation failure (MoE, 2024). This underrepresentation points to a systemic failure in translating policy into practice. Rationalist assumptions in inclusive education research might claim that Malawi's national policy frameworks, including the final draft, National Inclusive Education Policy (NIEP; MoE, 2023) and the NESIP (MoE, 2020), were formulated to address these disparities. Nonetheless, Kamchedzera (2015a) argued that the lack of coordinated support has hindered the broader adoption of inclusive education practices in Malawi.

A prominent discourse in Malawi's inclusive education policy frameworks primarily addresses human resource requirements, aiming to ensure that teachers are readily available to teach learners with diverse learning needs (Kamchedzera, 2015b). However, the persistent shortage of qualified teachers capable of delivering quality education to learners with special educational needs remains a critical challenge. Research studies such as Slee (2018) and de Souza (2022) have revealed that teachers often lack the specialised content knowledge and pedagogical skills necessary for inclusive education, leading to suboptimal learning experiences. Furthermore, there are limited professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their inclusive education approaches.

Malawi's legislative commitments reflect the United Nations' (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities call for equal access to education for all. However, the persistent exclusion of learners with disabilities from mainstream education exposes the dissonance between policy and practice (de Souza, 2024). Education policy research has identified physical access as the main problem. However, accessibility in education encompasses more than physical access. It also involves creating barrier-free learning environments, adaptive technologies, and flexible curricula. This situation reflects systemic barriers that disproportionately affect marginalised groups. Consequently, there is a need to make education systems adopt holistic approaches to accessibility, incorporating physical infrastructure improvements, curriculum adaptations, and the provision of assistive technologies. Additionally, addressing cultural attitudes and biases that perpetuate exclusion is important to promoting a more inclusive educational environment. Thus, effective policy implementation requires explicit guidelines, adequate funding for specialised resources, and clear accountability mechanisms (Mgomezulu, 2017). Chitiyo et al. (2019) underscored the need for strategies such as the recruitment of specialised personnel and the provision of targeted professional development.

Theoretical Perspective

The introduction reflected on what constitutes a policy. Is it a text? What are other ways of policy presentation? Policy is a text that gives "instructions" on how a certain practice should be implemented. This definition has been the traditional approach to policy formulation and implementation, hence much emphasis on rationality, evidence, and evaluation. However, policy can be regarded as both text and discourse (Ball, 1993). It must be acknowledged before going any further that

> While policy texts on their own do not and cannot provide us with the whole—or even a whole—story (to do this, we always need to get to the actors or stakeholders in some way because that's how we come to an understanding of the lived effects of policy), they do tell us something about the way that problematisations manifest, and the things that are prioritised within our society. (Mockler & Stacey, 2024, p. 25)

Thus, this study uses the term "policy" as a text or written document while acknowledging that this may exist in other forms. The study uses Carol Bacchi's (2009) theory of problematisation to form a theoretical framework. There has been considerable attention to the theory of problematisation because it offers new ways of thinking about, in this case, inclusive education problems as manifested in the policies. Here, we can only have a very brief overview of what this theory is all about. For a detailed account of this theory, recommended readings are Bacchi (2009, 2025) and Bacchi and Goodwin (2016). Bacchi's problematisation theory challenged rationalist approaches to policy analysis. Bacchi posited that policies do not merely address pre-existing problems. Instead, they actively shape and construct what is understood as the "problem." This perspective shifts the analytical focus from the solutions proposed by policies to the assumptions and representations embedded within them.

In applying this theory to inclusive education policy research, Bacchi's (2009) framework is particularly transformative. Education policies often claim to address issues such as inequality and access. However, employing the problematisation theory, we can critically examine how these problems are framed and what alternative perspectives are excluded. Moreover, Bacchi's theory speaks to the ontological shift from rationalist to critical policy research. Rationalist approaches, focused on measurable impacts and efficiency, often treat policy as a neutral tool to address clearly defined problems. In contrast, critical policy research emphasises the value-laden and contested nature of policy processes. Bacchi's problematisation theory resonates with this shift by exposing how policies are imbued with power relations and ideologies that shape societal values and lived experiences. In Malawi, inclusive education is often framed through rationalist logics as a technical issue of access, resources, and implementation. This theoretical perspective reveals how such representations overlook deeper structural inequalities, cultural contexts, and power relations affecting learners and teachers. Therefore, the theory highlights silences in policy discourse and opens space for more critical, context-sensitive, and transformative approaches to inclusivity.

Research Design and Methodology

Stacey and Mockler (2024a, p. 4) reminded us that "when conducting policy analysis, it's important to think first about the kind of question one wishes to ask. Then, an approach that is appropriate to answer this question can be considered." Stacey and Mockler provided a list of nine possible questions that policy researchers could ask in their analysis work. All nine questions are relevant. However, this study adapts and concentrates on questions that are more relevant to the analysis of Malawi's policy stipulations on inclusive education. These questions focus on scope, power dynamics, history, and language. The approach here is that Stacey and Mockler's list of questions is embedded in the questions listed in Bacchi's (2009) methodological framework used in this study (see Figure 1), responding to the research questions in the introduction. The intention is to

> emphasise that policy is not only about what is and is not said, but also about what is able to be said (or written), and the ways in which language in policy can both reflect and construct ways of thinking about particular issues. (Stacey & Mockler, 2024a, p. 5)

So far, the scope of the questions in this study, as Stacey and Mockler recommended, has been stipulated. What is necessary now is to choose the appropriate approach to answer these questions. The approach here is intertwined because the questions to be answered are found in the approach itself, as shown in Figure 1.

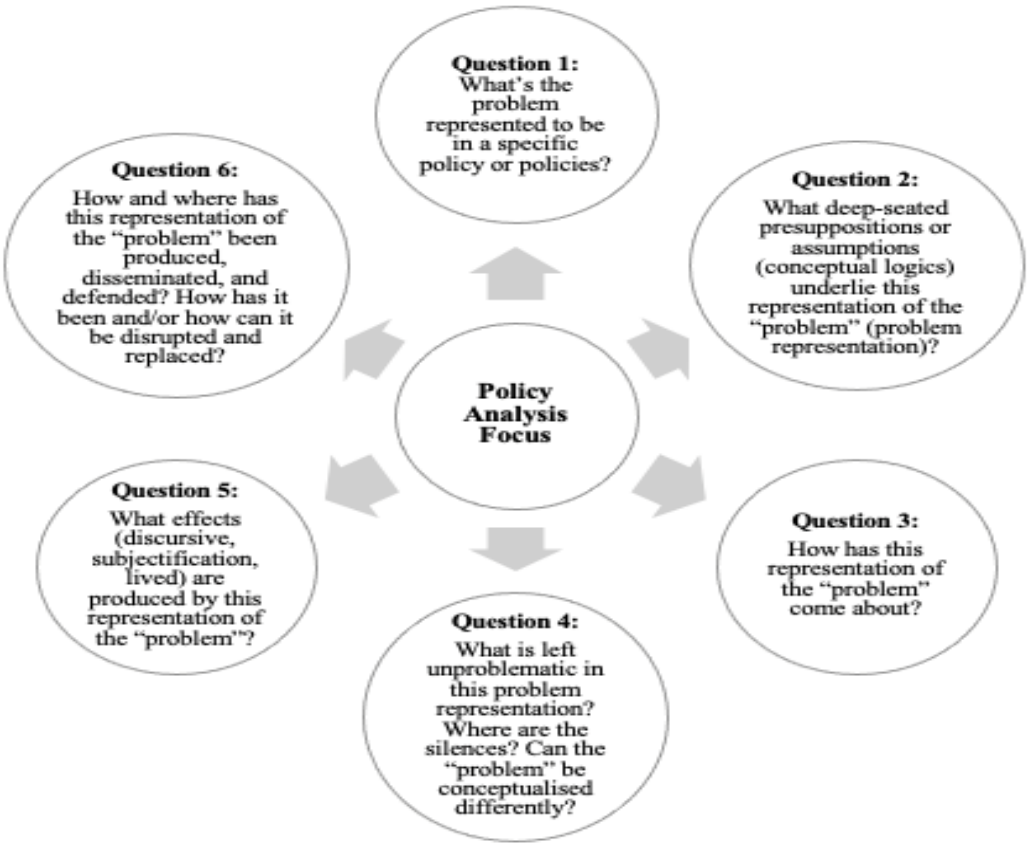
Stacey & Mockler (2024a, p. 4) articulated the

> theory and method for text and document analysis—analysing policy as a written document or via text available in the media or online . . . policy analysis via the views of human participants—those who create, enact, or otherwise experience policy.

This study takes the text or document analysis option using a critical policy analysis approach. It has to be noted that "critical research thereby differs epistemologically from rationalist approaches to policy analysis, finding value in multiple perspectives and a range of lived experiences rather than seeking to identify singular truths" (Stacey & Mockler, 2024a, p. 8). Since Bacchi's problematisation was chosen to inform the study theoretically, this choice has implications for the approach to be employed. Thus, the study takes the method of critical policy analysis, abbreviated as WPR for "What is the Problem Represented to be?" (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi, 2025; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Rinquest and Simba (2024) showed in practical terms how this method works, thus giving it a practical definition (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

"What is the Problem Represented to Be" Policy Analysis Method



The WPR methodological framework involves a set of six guiding questions designed to uncover the underlying assumptions, values, and power dynamics embedded in policy documents and discourses. These questions interrogate how problems are represented, what is left unproblematised, and the implications for those affected by the policies. Rinquest and Simba (2024) used the WPR's six questions as guiding stages for their analysis and then weighed in the analysis on their research focus. Of course, that was just a methodological intention because in their analysis and discussion, it became more complex and intertwined, and they could not strictly follow the question-turned-stage flow. This study approaches the analysis similarly, but with rethought stages. Problematisation as a theory and the WPR as a methodological tool are combined to create an analytical framework that converts the WPR's six questions into three stages of analysis, following the representation, manifestation, and reframing (RMR) analytical approach, as outlined in Table 1. The RMR framework corresponds to the three research questions for this study.

Table 1

RMR Critical Policy Analysis Approach

Stages	**Questions**
1 Representation	Question 1: What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policies?
	Question 2: What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions (conceptual logics) underlie this representation of the problem (problem representation)?
2 Manifestation	Question 3: How has this representation of the problem come about?
	Question 4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the problem be conceptualised differently?
3 Reframing	Question 5: What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the problem?
	Question 6: How and where has this representation of the problem been produced, disseminated, and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?

The study uses a single policy document (the final draft NIEP; MoE, 2023) as its unit of analysis, selected through a purposeful criterion. It is the draft policy intended for the national roll-out of inclusive education, making it a foundational text that shapes subsequent policy directions and practices. Thus, the selection is justified by its strategic relevance rather than representativeness. The analytical process is guided systematically by Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach, with the steps and guiding questions outlined in Table 1 ensuring transparency and coherence in the analysis. Coding was conducted by identifying recurring problem representations, underlying assumptions, and silences within the text, which were then interpreted in relation to rationalist and critical policy perspectives. Trustworthiness is supported through a careful application of the analytical framework and close engagement with the text. Institutional research ethical approval was not required because the study is based solely on the analysis of a public document.

Results

The Problem: Definition and Representation

What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policies? This question is the starting point of the critical policy analysis in the WPR approach (Bacchi, 2025; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). By asking what the problem is or how it is defined in the policy, the intention is to set the context of the analysis. After assertions, the next critical task is to look at the problem representation. What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions (conceptual logics) underlie this representation of the problem (problem representation)? The conceptual logics are intended to highlight the problem of what a practice is meant to be (Rinquest & Simba, 2024). The second-order effects of the policy underpin these two questions from the WPR perspective. Before we go any further, let us look at the final draft of NIEP (MoE, 2023), the data source for this study, and how the problem is defined and represented. The quotation below captures both the definition and the representation:

> Malawi is a signatory to several universal agreements that advocate for the provision of adequate educational opportunities for learners with diverse needs. From these agreements, Malawi developed more comprehensive strategies to better respond to the educational needs of learners with varied backgrounds, disabilities and conditions. In 2009, Malawi developed the national special needs education policy guidelines. The guidelines provide a framework for Special Needs Education in Malawi. Implementation of the guidelines provided a mechanism for the effective and standardized implementation of Special Needs Education. The Government's commitment to embracing inclusive education started in 2017 as evident in its aspiration to introduce Compulsory Education (CE) as provided for in the Education Act of 2013, and the National Education Policy of 2016. Despite these and other related policy and programming initiatives, access to and participation in education for all remains a challenge at all levels. To address this challenge more comprehensively, GoM [Government of Malawi] through the Ministry of Education resolved to develop a stand-alone policy to ensure equitable access to quality education for all hence the development of NIEP. (MoE, 2023, pp. 9–10)

The problem is inclusive education. We may argue about this designation, but a problem is not necessarily something negative. It may be a concept, a practice, or a structure. Thus, the problem in the NIEP is inclusive education, and is defined as the "advocate for providing adequate educational opportunities for learners with diverse needs" (MoE, 2023, p. 9). This problem, inclusive education, can then be problematised—the most important task in the critical policy analysis. How is this problem (of inclusive education) represented? The problem representation is that "despite these and other related policy and programming initiatives, access to and participation in education for all remains a challenge at all levels" (MoE, 2023, p. 10). In other words, the practice implementation for inclusive education is failing. Why the practice is failing despite the enactment of several policies and programme activities is the question that policy research should answer.

How has the policyholder, the government, responded to the problem representation when it realised that the practice is failing? It is indicated that "to address this challenge more comprehensively, GoM through the Ministry of Education resolved to develop a stand-alone policy to ensure equitable access to quality education for all, hence the development of NIEP" (MoE, 2023, p. 10). Thus, the NIEP is supposed to solve the problem representation (this point will be discussed in detail later), which is inclusive education and that it advocates for equal educational opportunities. Inclusive education is failing in implementation despite the existence of policy frameworks to guide the practice.

Manifestation of the Problem: History, Absences and Alternatives

How has the problem (inclusive education defined and represented) manifested in the NIEP (MoE, 2023)? Here, we look at the preamble of the problem, what remains silent, and what is potentially possible. The historicity of the problem is very important because it helps to contextualise the problematisation (Bacchi, 2009). Given that in the critical policy analysis the goal is not only to provide solutions to the problem, understanding how the problem started helps to design appropriate responses that can inform the implementation of the practice (Stacey & Mockler, 2024a). What is the history of inclusive education as represented in the NIEP?

> Malawi's pursuit of education for all began with the introduction of Special Needs Education (SNE) in the 1950s under the guidance of faith-based organizations. The Scottish Ministries established the first special school for learners with visual impairment at Chilanga in Kasungu in 1950. In 1968, Fathers of Immaculate Conception of the Roman Catholic Church established a SNE Teacher Training College at Montfort Campus in the Chiradzulu district. The Malawi Government officially began to provide funding for SNE programmes in 1967. In 1996 the Ministry of Education, Under the UNDP 5th Country Programme established the Learning Difficulties Programme at Montfort Campus to cater for the remaining categories of learners with special educational needs whose needs were not being served in the education system. The provision of SNE services for learners was done primarily through special schools and resource centres and through itinerant teaching programmes. Commitment to education for all was further demonstrated through the Education Development Plan from 1962 to 1967 which planned for Universal Primary Education subsequently culminated in the introduction of Free Primary Education in 1994. (MoE, 2023, p. 9)

The above quotation shows where we come from as a country, from special to inclusive education. Throughout this journey, not everything about inclusive education has been taken on board. Thus, what are the absences? The NIEP itself has an answer to this question. It says:

> While the implementation of strategies on Special Needs Education has resulted in improved access to education by learners with diverse needs, Malawi needs to change the discourse and practice in the provision of education to learners with diverse needs for it to graduate to inclusive education. Currently, the provision of support to learners with diverse needs in Malawi is largely limited to learners with disabilities. (MoE, 2023, p. 17)

In observing these absences, the NIEP weighs in on alternatives. The absences' logic and the alternatives' rationale are also discussed later. But the policy mentions that:

> In 2017, the Ministry of Education adopted the concept of inclusive education and developed a National Strategy for Inclusive Education (NSIE-2017-2021). The NSIE broadened the scope of inclusive education beyond learners with disabilities and envisioned an education system that enhances access to education by learners with diverse needs at all levels of education. However, the delivery of inclusive education is still sub-optimal because of several key challenges. (MoE, 2023, p. 17)

Reframing the Problem: Considering the Effects and Scope

The problem in the NIEP is that "despite these and other related policy and programming initiatives, access to and participation in education for all remains a challenge at all levels" (MoE, 2023, p. 10). Thus, what effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the problem? The answer to this question is not far. The NIEP stipulates that

> The Government of Malawi has over the years emphasized the "all inclusive" approach to education using various guidelines and practices that feature in various policy documents, guidelines and frameworks. However, this has left a lot of areas uncoordinated and/or poorly addressed to secure the provision of meaningful inclusive education. This has resulted in the exclusion of many children from without (out of school) and within the education system. This inclusive education policy provides an opportunity to redefine and recast the delivery framework and management and education services to respond to the diverse needs of all learners in Malawi; ensuring equity of access to quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource mobilization, allocation and use. All these in partnerships with various stakeholders including communities to achieve quality learning outcomes. (MoE, 2023, p. 8)

In short, the effects of the problem representation include the exclusion of qualifying individuals from education because the system cannot cater for their needs. The effects are, of course, funnelling. If these individuals are left out of the education system, issues of literacy and social well-being come into play. The quote above also addresses how and where this representation of the problem has been produced, disseminated, and defended. How has it been and how can it be disrupted and replaced?

> The National Education Policy (2016) and the National Education Sector Investment Plan (NESIP, 2020 to 2030) detail the Ministry of Education's priorities and strategies to improve education delivery at all levels. Specifically, under the inclusive education, gender and other cross-cutting issues, one of NESIP's strategic objectives is to improve governance and management of inclusive education, gender and other cross cutting issues. To achieve this objective the key priority action for the Ministry of Education is to develop and implement National Inclusive Education Policy. (MoE, 2023, p. 18)

The policy stipulation above means that the NIEP has been formulated to disrupt or replace the problem representation. But how can the NIEP achieve this when the policy goal "is that all learners at all levels of the education system should equitably access quality education based on their differences" (MoE, 2023, p. 19). Should learners be educated *based* on their differences? The issue of language is equally important in critical policy analysis. What is the value of educating learners based on their differences? According to language dictionaries, it seems that "based" means using something specified as the foundation or starting point of something. With this understanding, the NIEP, a policy meant to promote inclusive education, mandates that learners' differences, such as visual and hearing impairments, should be the basis or starting point of their education. This situation is nothing but the philosophy of the special school (de Souza, 2023).

Perhaps, a suitable alternative could be "regardless"? Then, the policy goal could be that all learners at all levels of the education system should equitably access quality education regardless of their differences. Language dictionaries indicate that "regardless" can refer to despite the prevailing situations, or without regard or consideration for. This wording agrees well with the intention of inclusive education rather than "based." Mgomezulu (2017) indicated that trivial language and grammatical errors can change meaning and render an entire policy document useless. Therefore, the NIEP goal does not qualify to be what it is called, at least from the critical analysis perspective. This language issue is just one example of many other issues of concern throughout the NIEP that further research can surface and present for improvements.

Another issue worthy of critical attention in the NIEP is policy mobility and borrowing. Most stipulations seem uncritically borrowed from other policy frameworks and moved into the NIEP without careful consideration of their implications. For example:

> The policy stresses the need for educating all learners with diverse needs in an inclusive setting; however, some learners with moderate to severe special educational needs will continue receiving their education in special settings as the system moves towards full inclusion. (MoE, 2023, p. 21)

> This strategy stresses the need for educating all learners in an inclusive setting; however, some learners with SEN will continue receiving their education in special settings as the system moves towards full inclusion. (MoE, 2017, p. 11)

This recommendation for a twin-track education system (first quote) was previously stipulated in Malawi's National Strategy on Inclusive Education (2017–2021) (second quote). The stipulation has been borrowed and moved into the NIEP as it appears in the other framework. What is problematic here is not the borrowing and the mobility per se, because this is standard policy formulation behaviour, but the stipulation on the twin-track system of education. A policy that claims to promote inclusive education needs to strongly mandate inclusivity. Otherwise, the unintended ramifications are that stakeholders might argue that the policy says some learners can still be in special schools based on moderate and severe special educational needs. What is the measure of moderate and severity? This stipulation does nothing but perpetuate exclusion at the policy level.

Discussion

This study sought to critique the rationalist approaches to education policy research and motivate for the critical policy research approaches. This critique has been demonstrated by analysing the final draft of Malawi's NIEP (MoE, 2023), which is pending roll-out. The analysis engaged with Bacchi's (2009) WPR policy analysis approach. The first question in the WPR policy analysis process is to define the problem represented. By asking what the problem is represented to be in a specific policy or set of policies, critical policy analysis seeks to challenge the assumption that policies are solutions, instead viewing them as forms of problematisation (Stacey & Mockler, 2024b). From the perspective of this study, the question asks how the problem is represented to be in the NIEP (MoE, 2023). Let us assume for a minute that we have taken a rationalist approach to analyse the policy. We see not the problem but solutions to the problem. In other words, the policy already knows the problem and has crafted its solutions.

Rationalist policy researchers analysing the NIEP would celebrate that the policy is intended to bring some solutions to the problem. Given we are dealing with inclusive education in this study, the problem is represented as the lack of adequate support for inclusivity at all levels of education (scope) to ensure that all learners are afforded equal educational opportunities (power dynamics), and undo past social injustices of special education (history) using clearly defined strategies and protocols for teachers and stakeholders to support inclusivity (language). Now, let us abandon the rationalist approach and return to our chosen approach in this study. Here, criticality supersedes evidence and evaluation (Stacey & Mockler, 2024a). Thus, the intention is not to offer solutions to the difficulties of inclusive education in Malawi but to problematise the problem of inclusive education. From this problematisation, solutions should emerge naturally, not as listed by the Minister in the foreword and indeed in the entire policy document (MoE, 2023). Therefore, the solutions offered in the policy to address challenges in inclusive education may not, as understood in problematisation theory, be the best responses to inclusive education.

From a critical policy analysis perspective, there are many conceptual logics that underpin the problem representation in the NIEP (MoE, 2023). A rationalist policy researcher might say that one deep-seated assumption made in the NIEP is that policies are meant to solve problems. In this case, previous policy frameworks were meant to address the problem of access to education by different marginalised groups. The NIEP acknowledged that the policies have, in some way, failed to address the problem, hence the inception of the present policy. This may sound logical and common sense. But this situation is in fact an ontological flaw and an epistemological mistake. Adopting a critical policy analysis perspective, the solution to policy failures is not to develop a new policy hoping it will address the problem (Stacey & Mockler, 2024b). Hundreds of policy documents may be released to address the problem, but remember, it is not the work of a policy to do this. This takes us to the problem representation in the problematisation theory (Bacchi, 2009).

If the NIEP implementation is approached as one of problem-solving, it is doomed to fail like the previous policy frameworks. We do need a standalone policy on inclusive education in Malawi to give a concentrated focus on the issue (de Souza, 2022). However, the underlying presupposition that the policy will solve a particular problem is problematic. Those rationalist researchers, overshadowed by evidence and evaluation curiosity, would clap their hands to the policymakers for these deep-seated assumptions (see Bacchi, 2025; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). This study chooses to differ. The trajectory should be to craft policy stipulations that mobilise a wide range of stakeholders to take measures necessary to enhance inclusive education. Therefore, education policy research for inclusive education needs to reorient itself towards critical policy analysis approaches, which then enable not problem-solving but problematising the assumptions that the policy makes and informs practice implementation towards education change.

Conclusion

This study focused on approaches to education policy research in the past few decades. These approaches range from rationalist to critical approaches. Rationalist policy research's failure to critically surface unanticipated ramifications undermines research's potential to inform practices. Critical policy analysis in inclusive education looks at how institutions can invest in training programmes, continuing professional development, and incentives to attract and retain qualified teachers. Without these criticality measures, the potential benefits of the inclusive education policy remain unrealised. Thus, simply formulating a policy to solve a problem does not help. Instead, we need to decipher underlying assumptions that come with the problem representation in the policies, hence the need for a critical policy analysis approach in policy research for inclusive education. This reorientation can enable recommendations that inform policy formulation processes, not with false pretences that the policies can solve a problem, but with a candid criticality of what issues come into play in inclusive education implementation in Malawi and potentially, beyond.

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Conference Report

Reimagining Teacher Education and Knowledge Production Inaugural CALT (Centre for African Language Teaching)

University of the Western Cape, South Africa
16–17 October, 2025

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During 2025, Centre for African Language Teaching (CALT) hosted a series of interconnected scholarly engagements under the theme, *Ukumiliselwa kwisiXhosa: Ukucinga Ngokutsha Ngemfundo Yootitshala Kunye Nokuveliswa Kolwazi (Rooted in isiXhosa: Reimagining Teacher Education and Knowledge Production)*. These engagements included a pre-conference webinar in August, and the Inaugural CALT Conference in October. Together, they created a sustained platform for dialogue, reflection, and collaboration. This report provides a comprehensive account of the CALT 2025 pre-conference and conference events by analysing their contributions to ongoing debates on multilingual education and decolonial pedagogy. It further reflects on the broader implications of these engagements for the future of African language education in South Africa and beyond.

The discussions across the CALT engagements were underpinned by a shared commitment to decolonisation and epistemic justice. Decolonisation, in this context, extends beyond curriculum reform to include the transformation of the linguistic and epistemological foundations of higher education. It requires a fundamental rethinking of what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge is valued, and in which languages knowledge is produced and disseminated. Language plays a critical role in this process. As a medium of instruction and a carrier of culture, language shapes how individuals understand and engage with the world. The dominance of colonial languages in education systems has historically marginalised Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of knowing. Reclaiming African languages, therefore, is not only about linguistic inclusion but also about restoring epistemic agency.

Multilingualism emerges as a key strategy in this regard. Rather than viewing languages as competing entities, multilingual approaches recognise the value of linguistic diversity and promote the use of multiple languages in teaching and learning. This includes practices such as translanguaging, which enables learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning. The CALT pre- and main conferences highlighted the importance of integrating African languages into all aspects of academic life, including curriculum design, research, and digital innovation. They also emphasised the need for collaboration between institutions, communities, and policymakers to achieve sustainable change.

The pre-conference webinar, held on the 13 August 2025, served as an important precursor to the main conference programme. Conducted virtually, it brought together 72 participants from across South Africa, representing a diverse range of disciplines and professional backgrounds. The primary objective of the webinar was to initiate dialogue on the role of African languages in education, with a focus on curriculum

development, research, supervision, and internationalisation. It also aimed to create a collaborative network of scholars and practitioners committed to advancing African language education. The webinar featured a series of presentations that addressed both theoretical and practical dimensions of African language education.

Dr Nikiwe Nondabula opened the session by situating the discussion within decolonial theory, emphasising the need to reclaim Indigenous epistemologies. Professor Rajendra Govender reinforced institutional commitment to African languages, and Professor Ayub Sheik's keynote addressed language displacement and its consequences. Subsequent presentations by Professor Nokhanyo Mdzanga, Dr Simthembile Xeketwana, Dr Dolly Dlavane, and Dr Mosa Nontsikelelo Khasu expanded on curriculum transformation, technology integration, systemic challenges, and digital innovation. These contributions collectively highlighted the intersection of pedagogy, policy, and technology.

One of the central themes of the pre- conference programme was curriculum transformation that focused on presentations highlighting the significance of mother-tongue instruction for enhancing cognitive development, improving learning outcomes, and fostering cultural identity. Participants argued that integrating African languages into the curriculum is essential for creating inclusive and equitable education systems. Another key theme, which focused on the internationalisation of African languages, highlighted the growing recognition of African languages in global academic and digital spaces. The integration of isiXhosa into translation platforms and the use of digital tools to enhance the language were identified as significant steps towards increasing its visibility, accessibility, and use.

The webinar also addressed institutional challenges, including the lack of adequately trained educators, limited teaching resources, and insufficient policy support. These challenges were identified as major barriers to the effective implementation of multilingual education. A particularly notable aspect of the webinar was its focus on digital innovation. Presenters explored the potential of artificial intelligence and digital technologies in advancing African language teaching and research. This included the development of digital learning tools, multilingual publishing platforms, and online resources. The discussion of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) further emphasised the importance of documenting and sharing innovative practices in multilingual pedagogy. The pre-conference webinar successfully established a collaborative intellectual platform for ongoing engagement, fostered a sense of shared purpose among participants, and laid the foundation for deeper discussions at the conference. Importantly, it demonstrated the potential of virtual platforms in expanding access to scholarly dialogue.

The Inaugural CALT Conference, held on 16 and 17 October 2025, marked a historic milestone in the field of African language education. Bringing together a wide range of stakeholders, the conference provided a platform for in-depth engagement on key issues related to multilingualism, pedagogy, and policy. The focus of this conference was an interrogation of the following 6 themes, which provided an excellent context for the exploration of some of the key issues to be considered when African languages are used as medium of instruction in teacher education programmes and knowledge production in various contexts:

- The Decolonial Imperative and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. South African curricula need urgent decolonisation to move away from Eurocentric perspectives that marginalise African experiences. Scholars advocate integrating Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS)—such as African dilemma tales—as counter-narratives that validate cultural wisdom. In visual arts and early childhood development, IKS-centred teaching restores human dignity and enables students to express personal identities while digital platforms like YouTube are being leveraged to deliver isiXhosa-centred pedagogies that affirm Indigenous epistemologies.
- Language Identity and the Status of Marginalised Dialects. A significant tension exists between official languages and localised identities. While isiXhosa is mandated for instruction, isiMpondo speakers feel their linguistic heritage is treated as an inferior dialect. Communities are calling for

isiMpondo recognition and school instruction to preserve cultural identity and end linguistic oppression.

- Multilingualism and Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education (MTBBE). The 2025 implementation of MTBBE represents a shift toward using African languages alongside English for subjects like science and mathematics from Grade 4 onwards. Translanguaging supports knowledge construction and elevates African language status, while innovative tools such as AI-powered chatbots and multilingual glossaries are being developed to provide academic support and reduce cognitive load for non-English speakers.

- Addressing the Literacy Crisis and Orthographic Mastery. South Africa struggles with persistent low literacy levels, with many Grade 4 learners unable to read for meaning. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, and limited parental involvement are key barriers, while reading clubs and enjoyment-based campaigns are proposed solutions. Systematic teaching of isiXhosa orthography is required because undergraduate students show persistent errors stemming from Foundation Phase curriculum gaps.

- Bridging the Gap in Teacher Education. A critical disconnect exists between English-centric university training and schools' linguistic realities. Pre-service teachers feel unprepared to teach complex subjects in isiXhosa due to lack of technical vocabulary and confidence. Recommended reforms include explicit instruction in the language of instruction, embedding isiXhosa linguistics modules before teaching methods, and developing bilingual training materials and videos.

- Gender, Representation, and Social Transformation. Education serves as a site for social transformation regarding gender and leadership. Research in Eastern Cape primary schools shows teachers believe girls can lead, yet institutional norms perpetuate patriarchal masculine leadership styles. Literature studies advocate challenging the marginalisation of women in traditional and Christian frameworks by promoting and acknowledging the significant role that women can play in these positions.

Day 1 of the conference featured a keynote address by Professor Ralarala, who called for structural transformation in universities, which set the tone for a range of presentations that challenged participants to move beyond symbolic gestures towards meaningful and sustained transformation. Nelson Mandela University's Faculty of Education was well represented by Mrs Manakele, who presented a paper on "The Use of isiXhosa Literature as a Pedagogical Tool to Teach isiXhosa to non-isiXhosa speakers in Education," Ms Peteni, who presented a paper on "Reimagining isiXhosa Pedagogies: Decoloniality and Early Language Acquisition on YouTube series Multilingual Minds Language Learning with Sis' Bongo," and Dr Ismail, who presented a paper on "Leveraging Artificial Intelligence for Student Success, Translanguaging and Social Justice." These papers were well received by a receptive and engaging audience.

On Day 1 of the conference, speakers emphasised the need to recognise African languages as legitimate mediums of academic discourse. They argued that languages such as isiXhosa possess the capacity to express complex ideas in fields such as science, philosophy, and technology. A major highlight was the panel discussion titled: "Envisioning CALT Centres in the Context of Multilingual-Based Bilingual Education, AI Technologies, and STEAM Competencies," facilitated by Professor Mdzanga and which included Professors Bayaga, Govender, and Kwatsha, and Drs Tyler and Guzula as panelists.

Day 2 of the conference featured a powerful keynote by Dr Tshongolo titled: "The Scares of the Tongue," which examined the psychological and historical impact of linguistic marginalisation by framing decolonisation from the perspectives of intellectual and emotional restoration. This was followed by an interactive workshop led by Drs Tyler and Xeketwana, which provided participants with practical tools for implementing multilingual teaching strategies. The focus on translanguaging as a structured pedagogical approach was particularly significant.

Participants engaged in activities such as bilingual concept mapping and collaborative translation, which demonstrated the potential of multilingual approaches in enhancing learning outcomes. The conference also recognised the emotional and cultural dimensions of language. Presentations highlighted the role of language in shaping identity and fostering a sense of belonging, thereby recognising the emotional and cultural dimensions of language.

Cultural activities during the gala dinner included presentations that reinforced the significance of celebrating linguistic diversity and cultural heritage within the context of African language teaching and learning. These discussions also highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing the challenges of language integration in higher education. The CALT events incorporating the pre-conference webinar and the stimulating conference programme, highlighted the transformative potential of African languages in education by focusing on themes such as decolonisation, multilingual pedagogy, and the integration of technology. The speakers' contributions and insights demonstrate a shared commitment to advancing isiXhosa as a language of knowledge production.

The emphasis on community engagement and policy alignment reflects a holistic approach to language development, which will make a meaningful contribution to broader efforts to achieve linguistic justice and educational equity. Furthermore, the conference demonstrated the potential of African languages to serve as powerful tools for knowledge production and educational transformation. As institutions continue to grapple with the challenges of decolonisation, initiatives such as these, led by CALT, provide valuable insights and practical guidelines for the promotion and development of African languages across various platforms and contexts, thereby reaffirming the importance of language in shaping more inclusive, equitable, and innovative educational systems.

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Book Review

Education Research in African Contexts: Traditions and New Beginnings for Knowledge and Impact

Edited by Paul Webb, Mathabo Khau, and Proscovia Namubiru Ssentamu Nomalungelo

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Education Research in African Contexts: Traditions and New Beginnings for Knowledge and Impact, edited by Paul Webb, Mathabo Khau, and Proscovia Namubiru Ssentamu is a comprehensive, timely text that showcases the significance of engaging with educational research methodologies and practices specifically designed to African settings. In this sense, it addresses a critical gap in academic literature by foregrounding African perspectives and realities in educational inquiry. Its focus on Indigenous research approaches such as storytelling, theatre, and eco-pedagogy, amongst others, demonstrates how research in African contexts can be decolonised so that African researchers can embrace solutions to address their unique regional challenges without having to rely on Western models. In this regard, for example, the use of Indigenous methodologies like the imbizo (South Africa) and baraza (Kenya) communal, oral-based traditions are presented as more effective and culturally relevant alternatives to standard Western research methods like focus groups.

The book's primary strengths lie in its contextual relevance, methodological rigour, and inclusive perspectives. In terms of contextual relevance, its major strength lies in its commitment to contextualising education research within African socio-political, economic, and cultural frameworks by demonstrating how research can be adapted to reflect local realities, challenges, and aspirations within African contexts. Furthermore, the authors strive to maintain methodological rigour in their chapters by providing practical guidance on conducting rigorous research while ensuring that cultural sensitivity is maintained. A feature of the text is its accessibility to both experienced researchers and emerging scholars by creating a balance between theoretical frameworks and actionable advice. Another significant strength of the book is its recognition that because educational challenges and opportunities vary significantly across countries, regions, and communities, research approaches must engender inclusive practices so

that diverse African insights and experiences are acknowledged in order to subvert monolithic, Western representations.

Further strengths include the book's exploration of Indigenous knowledge systems and their roles in educational research, the focus on ethical considerations specific to African research contexts, an examination of power dynamics and positionality in educational inquiry, and practical strategies for community engagement and participatory research approaches. The book's focus on promoting African-centred educational research by reimaging educational paradigms that respect African realities and that challenge Eurocentric assumptions in academic inquiry, provides a platform for researchers to explore new possibilities for inclusive and transformative research. The book makes a concerted attempt to advance knowledge, promote equality, and empower individuals and communities to thrive in an ever-changing world.

The book, which provides a platform for scholarship holders and researchers from the East and South African-German Centre of Excellence for Educational Research Methodologies and Management (CERM-ESA), is structured into two primary sections:

- Chapters 1–6 explore higher education issues by focusing on current challenges and innovations within African universities.

- Chapters 7–14 explore school-based research by focusing on interactions between schools and society, offering practical findings from local educational sites.

In Chapter 15, the final chapter of the book, Michael Samuel provides a critique of each of the other chapters. The chapters in the book cover a broad spectrum of modern educational concerns including issues such as academic resilience, gender, and identity, and incorporate a wide range of research genres, with a specific focus on their reimagination for African contexts and experiences.

In Chapter 1, "A Reflection on Collaborative Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: The Case of the East and South African-German Centre of Excellence for Educational Research Methodologies and Management," Noel Japheth, John K. Chang'ach, Susan Kurgat, and Mercy Chemutai Barasa highlight the successes and challenges of establishing joint teaching and research programmes across five universities, focusing on capacity-building and context-sensitive research. The authors examined the case of CERM-ESA through the lens of collaborative teaching and learning in higher education postgraduate research.

Janet Ronoh and Paul Webb explore the intricate interplay between traditional wisdom and contemporary education by investigating the efficacy of an Indigenous methodology with teacher educators in Chapter 2, "Exploring Teacher Educator Views on Place and Position of Indigenous Knowledge in the school Curriculum Using an Indigenous Methodology." The findings are significant in that they illuminate the potential of Indigenous wisdom to enrich and contextualise educational experiences, leading to a deeper understanding of cultural heritage and identity.

Curwyn Mapaling, Paul Webb, and Belinda du Plooy, in Chapter 3, "A Quantitative Study on Academic Resilience Among Engineering Students at a South African University," examine factors

that contribute to academic resilience among engineering students at a South African university, despite challenging educational and socioeconomic environments. Their findings inform strategies for fostering student success and well-being, empowering future generations of engineers to thrive in a rapidly evolving world.

In Chapter 4, "Exploring Faculty and Student Perspectives Regarding Training and Research Interventions on Climate Change and Sustainability at Makerere University in Uganda," David Ssekamatte, Karsten Speck, and Bernd Siebenhüner examine the current state of sustainability education and its challenges through participatory inquiry, highlighting the significance of holistic approaches to environmental education and advocacy.

Issues of climate change are further explored by Nelson Mandela, David Ssekamatte, and Benjamin Kyalo Wambua in Chapter 5, "University-Community Engagement Opportunities to Address Climate Change Issues in an African Context. The Case of Makerere University, Uganda," in which they analyse university-community engagement opportunities aimed at addressing climate change issues in an African context, by evaluating initiatives led by Makerere University to foster local, sustainable solutions.

In Chapter 6, "Picturing the Experiences of the Student–Supervisor Relationship Towards Completion of Doctoral Studies in African Universities," Cornelius Kipleting Rugut explores the experiences of doctoral candidates in African universities, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities inherent in the supervision process. His insights inform strategies for enhancing support structures and fostering academic success.

In Chapter 7, "Exploratory Factor Analysis of Stakeholders' Participation in School Management and the Enhancement of Learners' Academic Achievement in Public Secondary Schools in Uganda," Dorothy Nakiyaga, David Serem, Proscovia Namubiru Ssentamu, and John Boit investigate the complex dynamics of school management and community engagement and its impact on academic achievement in Ugandan secondary schools through exploratory factor analysis.

Chapter 8, "Exploring the Use of Participatory Visual Methods in Teaching Sexuality Education Within the HIV and AIDS Education Programme in Kenyan Secondary Schools," by Lily Yego, Violet Nabwire Opata, Heloise Sathorar, and Mathabo Khau investigate the effectiveness of participatory visual methods in broaching sensitive topics such as sexuality, HIV and AIDS education, and fostering inclusive and empowering learning environments in Kenyan classrooms.

In Chapter 9, "Barriers and Enablers of Educational Inclusion of Children in Street Situations in Uganda," Annah Atuhaire, Jonah Nyaga Kindiki, Stella Kyohairwe, and Susan Kurgat delve into the perceptions of street children in Kampala, Uganda, advocating for their inclusion in mainstream education, and challenging societal stereotypes and prejudices.

Chapter 10 by Evans Mos Olao, Bernard Misigo, and Karsten Speck, "Using Participatory Visual Methods to Teach Character Education in Early Childhood, Kenya," highlights how visual tools can engage learners and teachers in moral and social development because visual methods are not only innovative approaches, but also child-friendly since they offer an alternative for better teaching and learning of character education in early childhood settings.

In Chapter 11, “A Focus on Drawing as Method: Insights From a Novice Participatory Visual Methodologies Researcher,” by Naomi Mworia with supervisors Dr Felicity W. Githinji and Professor Naydene De Lange, the researcher reflects on her experiences of the use of drawing as a participatory visual methodology to gain deeper insights from participants in primary education.

Simon Ekiru, Mathabo Khau, and Sammy Chumba in Chapter12, “Using Gender-Atypical Kiswahili Children’s Stories to Deconstruct Gender-Stereotyped Roles Among Learners,” examine how the use of gender-atypical Kiswahili children’s stories can be used to deconstruct gender-stereotyped roles among primary school learners.

Chapter 13, “A ‘Play Way’ Method for Developing Digital Literacy Among Pupils in Primary Schools in Nandi Sub-County, Kenya,” by Sarah Jemutai, focuses on the transformative potential of play-based learning in developing digital literacy among pupils in Kenyan schools. She deduces that, through the play way method, educators can empower students to become active participants in their learning, fostering creativity, critical thinking, and technological fluency.

Ayanda Simayi and Paul Webb, in Chapter 14,”Culturally Appropriate Linguistic Responses to Taboo Issues When Teaching Biology,” focus on how language and local culture influence the teaching of sensitive topics in the science curriculum. The research underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in educational practice, fostering dialogue
and understanding across and within cultural contexts.

Chapter 15 by Michael Anthony Samuel, “Beyond Saviour Research: A Critical Synthesis of the CERM-ESA Project Celebration,” critically synthesises the book’s themes, offering a review of the CERM-ESA project by critiquing the perception of Africa as needing external "saviours," and emphasising that relevant educational solutions already exist within local, homegrown projects. The chapter is divided into two parts, Part A reviews *Education Research in African Contexts* within the context of the African Union’s Agenda 2063, showing how the CERM-ESA project supports continental transformation. Part B examines CERM-ESA’s institutional research, focusing on higher education and school–society studies.

Collectively, the narratives in this book offer a rich tapestry of African scholarship and inquiry, illuminating the multifaceted intersections of education, society, and culture, and provide an insightful resource for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers committed to shaping responsive and inclusive educational systems across Africa. Furthermore, the book successfully bridges the gap between tradition and modernity to create a new, empowering narrative for African education research. It will appeal to educational researchers working in African contexts, development practitioners and policymakers, graduate students in education and related fields, and readers interested in developing a better understanding of culturally responsive research practices and how to implement them for research purposes.