

Decolonisation of Education in Public Primary Schools in South Africa: Challenges of Integration and Adaptation for the Way Forward

Zayd Waghid* 

Faculty of Education
Cape Peninsula University of Technology
Cape Town, South Africa

Abstract. Over the last decade, debates concerning the decolonisation of education have centred mainly within higher education. This research attempts to address this gap by examining in-service teachers' preparedness to implement a decolonised curriculum in public primary schools. Methodologically, the study employed an explanatory mixed-methods research design informed by a pragmatic research paradigm. The sample group included 150 in-service teachers from seven public primary schools in the Foundation Phase, all of whom completed questionnaires. This was followed by 96 teachers who participated in focus group interviews across the seven schools. The findings revealed a generally optimistic outlook among the sampled participants regarding in-service teachers' preparedness for decolonising education. While the results broadly demonstrate a degree of agreement that some resources, policy support, and stakeholder commitment exist for implementing a decolonised curriculum, they simultaneously reveal notable neutrality and uncertainty. Bureaucratic government policies, resource inadequacy, language-related tensions, political influences, and inadequate stakeholder engagement – with communities, schools and government – were revealed by participants as significant barriers to the realisation of decolonised practices in schools. The study contributes empirically to the death of research by demonstrating disparities in perceived readiness across subjects, with Humanities exhibiting greater readiness than STEM subjects, which showed comparatively lower confidence. The study recommends contextually grounded, system-wide support for meaningful curriculum transformation.

Keywords: Decolonisation; curriculum; in-service teachers; public schools; social justice

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*Corresponding author: Zayd Waghid; WAGHIDZ@cput.ac.za

1. Introduction

Ten years ago, between 2015 and 2016, the nationwide student protests in South Africa led by the #Rhodesmustfall and subsequent #Feesmustfall movements disrupted the status quo concerning the lack of transformation, mainly in higher education in South Africa (Heleta, 2016; Le Grange, 2016; Waghid & Hibbert, 2018a; Waghid & Hibbert, 2018b). While these movements emanated from universities, they sparked broader debates about the persistence of Eurocentric-dominated curricula and underscored the urgent need for decolonisation efforts in schools.

Over the last decade, these debates have largely remained in higher education, with relatively few empirical studies examining what decolonisation of education means in practice for schools. Much of the available literature concerning the decolonisation of education in South Africa has tended to emphasise, through small-scale studies, the need for professional development among teachers, curriculum reform, systemic support, and policy and institutional alignment (De Beer & Petersen, 2016; Govender, 2018; Mudaly, 2018; Tibbitts & Weldon, 2017). Consequently, this imbalance has left a significant research gap concerning how teachers are navigating or resisting Eurocentric-dominated curricula.

In its attempts to decolonise education in schools, the South African Department of Basic Education has begun prioritising the use of African languages as mediums of instruction, learning and assessment beyond Grade 3 and, to this end, established a National Language Unit. The Unit included in its programme a three-day workshop from the 18 to 24 November 2024, which focused on adapting Grade 4 Mathematics and Natural Sciences materials into African languages with implementation for 2025 (Department of Basic Education, 2025). Despite these efforts, the Minimum Requirements for the Teacher Education Qualification Framework (MRTEQ), the government's policy document that guides teacher education institutions in designing and developing their respective teacher education curricula, remains largely silent around explicit strategies for decolonising teaching and learning practices (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2015).

In addition, the plethora of policy statements since the advent of democracy in South Africa represent initiatives from the late 1990s to 2012 aimed at transforming and making school education more equitable. These include the Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), the National Curriculum Statements (NCS), the Revised National Curriculum Statements (RNCS), and the current Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS). These initiatives have been critiqued on the grounds that they have done little to address issues of decolonisation of the school curriculum (Lebeloane, 2017; Mahabeer, 2020). The absence of clear policy guidelines for decolonising teaching and learning practices, by implication, means that many schools in South Africa will continue to function bound by a curriculum that perpetuates Western/European-dominated knowledge.

While some teachers may recognise the need for decolonisation, as they and education policy makers understand the concept, current research suggests that teachers often lack adequate training, together with limited conceptual knowledge and institutional support to implement meaningful changes to their teaching strategies in school classrooms (Harvey & Russell-Mundine, 2018; Mahabeer, 2020; Domínguez, 2020). Schools, therefore, remain bound to a Western/European-centric school curriculum, which further consolidates the preparation of students for Western/European contexts rather than embracing African identities and values. This further undermines the promotion of equity and social justice (Lockett, 2016).

Against this backdrop, this study addressed a critical gap in the literature in that, despite debates concerning the decolonisation of education being theoretically informed, their translation into school practices and policies remains empirically underexplored. The article addresses this gap by shifting the focus of decolonisation debates from higher education to the under-researched context of public primary schools. The article focuses on teachers' preparedness and the systemic barriers constraining curricula transformation.

More specifically, it examines how teachers in South African schools are equipped – or under-equipped – to enact decolonisation in their classrooms, and the required form of institutional and policy support needed for equitable and sustained transformation. The article thus further offers a comparative perspective across disciplines, highlighting how disciplinary epistemologies influence the enactment of decolonised pedagogies in practice. The article also holds relevance beyond the South African education context, as many education systems, particularly in the Global South, grapple with current tensions between policy and curricular transformation.

The article is guided by the following research questions, which investigated both the adequacy of teacher preparation and systemic barriers to the equitable implementation of a decolonised curriculum in South African schools:

RQ1: How well are teachers trained and supported to implement a decolonised curriculum, and what resources do they have access to?

RQ2: What systemic and institutional challenges hinder the implementation of a decolonised curriculum in schools?

2. The state of decolonization of education in South African schools

Despite the fact that student protests in higher education occurred over a decade ago in South Africa, the current school curriculum remains largely unchanged from CAPS – the 2012 end product of a series of curriculum transformation initiatives post-1994. There is still a dearth of empirical research, including recent research, into decolonising learning and teaching practices in public schools in South Africa. Scholars such as Lebeloane (2017) and Schirmer and Visser (2023) argue that decolonising education from the outset must happen in schools if we are to achieve equity and social justice across our society. This view contrasts with that of scholars such as Mamdani (2007), who insist that the transformation of education in schools must be initiated in higher education, given universities'

influential role in generating research to underpin the transformation of the education system as a whole. Irrespective of these contrasting viewpoints, the author argues that a simultaneous, reciprocal, and dynamic relationship needs to exist between universities and schools, particularly in teacher education, where the teacher education curriculum both informs and is informed by the school curriculum.

The argument for the nature of the process of decolonising education is ultimately influenced by those who are in positions of power in curriculum development and reform processes (Heleta, 2016; Le Grange, 2016). Many have argued that decolonising education necessitates a critique of education policies that maintain Western/Eurocentric ideologies and neoliberal interests under the guise of universality (Heleta & Chasi, 2023; Le Grange, 2023; Waghid & Meda, 2025). Therefore, if the current teacher education curricula and school curricula continue uncritically and without rigorous reflection to reproduce Western/European knowledge, challenging such a system would require a holistic approach rather than a superficial, stand-alone “tick-box” approach involving individual and siloed efforts (Govender & Naidoo, 2023; Luckett & Shay, 2017; Waghid & Ontong, 2022).

MRTEQ promotes institutional flexibility by encouraging teacher educators to engage in curriculum (re)design and research. Teacher education programmes are expected to address the many critical challenges facing education in South Africa today, such as poor content/conceptual knowledge and the challenges resulting from the apartheid legacy (DHET, 2015). This flexibility implies that teacher education institutions are granted discretion to leave the addressing of these challenges to teacher education providers. This means they may choose to collaborate with other universities or not, and even with students. The result could be fragmented, isolated communities of practice, particularly around deliberations on what decolonising education might mean in practice (Sayed et al., 2017). The reality is that (university) educators in South Africa have been reported to have a limited conceptual understanding of the decolonisation of education (Sayed et al., 2017).

Consequently, if teacher educators themselves have a limited and non-agreed-upon understanding not only of what constitutes decolonisation but also of what the process entails, it follows that both pre- and in-service teachers would struggle to make sense of, and engage with, this phenomenon. Mahabeer (2020) further critiques the teacher education curriculum in South Africa as overly theoretical and insufficiently pragmatic, particularly in its failure to address classroom realities. It is therefore reasonable to argue that, for many teachers, the practicalities of decolonising their pedagogical approaches in classroom contexts may seem unattainable.

In addition, the current national school curriculum in South Africa, the CAPS, initiated in 2012, outlines the content to be taught, the pedagogical approaches to be used and assessment practices. The policy document has undergone several reviews, most notably a comprehensive review commissioned by the Zenex

Foundation in South Africa concerning English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) for the Foundation Phase in Grades R–3. The aim of this review was to examine the curriculum's adequacy in preparing learners, particularly those transitioning from their first language (FL) or mother tongue to English as a first additional language (EFAL). This is because English is the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in Grade 4 in the majority of schools (Pretorius & Murray, 2023). The key recommendations made in the report include strengthening foundational literacy in EFAL by increasing instructional time; formalising core curriculum and assessment standards; enhancing language instruction through theme-based and bilingual approaches; and ensuring that reading fluency benchmarks are achieved irrespective of the chosen LoLT pathway (Pretorius & Murray, 2023).

The review of the South African EFAL curriculum for Grades R–3 offers valuable recommendations concerning developing and improving English as a language of instruction in South African schools for children whose mother tongue is not English. Therefore, the author submits that there are significant shortcomings. For one, the implementation of the proposed recommendations to date has not been integrated into the current CAPS curriculum, which, by implication, means that teachers in schools continue to rely on the existing, outdated curricula. Secondly, while the review acknowledges the importance of multilingualism in teaching and learning in the majority of South African schools and the country's multicultural context, it surprisingly does not address the need to integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into the curriculum.

Studies have investigated teachers' attempts to integrate IKS into their teaching. A study conducted by Mudaly (2018) found that a sample of Mathematics teachers in South Africa reported difficulties in departing from the conventional CAPS curriculum and in adequately integrating indigenous knowledge when attempting to decolonise the mathematics curriculum. While the participants in the study recognised the need to decolonise learning in the mathematics curriculum, the study's findings corroborate the persistent need to develop curriculum materials to guide teachers in their attempts to indigenise the curriculum (Mudaly, 2018). Maluleka and Ramoupi (2021) assert that, despite post-1994 curricular reforms within South Africa's History curriculum, several challenges persist.

Inadequate teacher preparation, epistemological dominance as a result of the legacy of apartheid, and structural barriers in schools prohibit the genuine integration of knowledge from the majority population, particularly among the marginalised sector of the country's school-going population. For Maluleka and Ramoupi (2021), meaningful decolonisation of the History curriculum demands moving beyond rhetoric to a genuinely inclusive approach through the integration of knowledge from the Global North and South towards achieving epistemic pluralism. Decolonising history education, as Maluleka and Ramoupi (2021) advocate, fundamentally requires reconstructing the objective of the study itself, where intellectual projects become part of the system. Mavuso et al. (2023) further claim that despite the potential of the African philosophy of Ubuntu,

which emphasises humanness, interconnectedness, communalism and reciprocity, these values are largely neglected in current teaching practices.

Based on the aforementioned, the lack of available resources, in particular, clear and pragmatic policy guidelines, is thus a significant impediment towards enabling schools to guide teachers towards decolonised practices in the classroom. Coupled with the current rigid CAPS, which has not been revised since 2012, which represents a significant systemic constraint, current pedagogical approaches continue to reinforce Western/European-dominated knowledge and further elaborate on how language is used to maintain such biases. These constraints systematically obstruct meaningful decolonisation processes in South African education (Lebeloane, 2017; Mahabeer, 2020; Waghid & Hibbert, 2018a; Waghid & Hibbert, 2018b; Waghid & Ontong, 2022). Moreover, there remains a dearth of empirical research concerning how teachers navigate the intersection of policy and curricula transformation across different subject domains.

In sum, the literature underscores five interrelated themes influencing the decolonisation of education in schools. Firstly, epistemic violence is perpetuated by a Western/European knowledge paradigm. Second, policy ambiguity, where rhetoric concerning transformation is quite prevalent but inadequately integrated. Third, the absence of teacher autonomy as a result of a rigid school curriculum in an education system that promotes compliance. Fourth, the marginalisation of indigenous home languages and fifth, the absence of IKS from the formal curriculum. These interrelated themes shape the conceptual lens of the study, enabling an analysis of how in-service teachers navigate current tensions that exist between policy and practice in public schools.

3. Methodology

This study employed an explanatory mixed-methods research design, as the research questions required a holistic overview of teachers' preparedness and resources (RQ1) and an in-depth exploration of the systemic challenges these teachers face (RQ2). Initial results were obtained from quantitative data, followed by qualitative data analysis, to deepen understanding of these initial results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The research design was considered to be beneficial for understanding the multifaceted nature of the research problem, requiring both quantitative and in-depth explanations to fully understand the phenomenon (Ivankova et al., 2006). In particular, quantitative data were necessary for determining the sample teachers' preparedness, demographic profiles and systemic constraints, while qualitative data contextualised the results. More specifically, this methodology afforded the sample teachers the opportunity to explicate their lived pedagogical realities and epistemic tensions faced when translating decolonial ideals into classroom practices.

The study was further informed by pragmatism. The main focus of such research centres on its implications, the significance of the research question(s) asked rather than the chosen methods, and on the use of diverse methods of data collection to inform the problem(s) identified (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). According to Morgan (2007), pragmatism focuses on assessing how shared

understanding can be achieved and what kinds of shared behaviours are possible from those understandings. Through a pragmatic research paradigm, this present study underscored the significance of in-service teachers' understandings as critical to bridging the gap between decolonial perspectives and pedagogical realities in classroom contexts. In particular, through pragmatism, this research aimed to examine not only the systemic constraints faced by in-service teachers towards decolonising their pedagogical practices, but also to create contextually relevant, actionable insights that can inform curriculum reform, teacher education and policy alignment.

Through an explanatory research design, sampling occurred in two phases. Data were firstly collected quantitatively through closed-ended questionnaires disseminated among participants, and secondly, qualitatively, where the initial results were analysed and followed up through qualitative data collection. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2017), through an explanatory research design, quantitative and qualitative data are related to each other and do not function independently. The sample group included 150 in-service teachers (n=150) in the Foundation Phase, all of whom completed questionnaires, and 96 teachers (n=96) from seven public primary schools who participated in focus group interviews. The questionnaire items were derived from the study's research questions and informed by key themes identified in the literature, which include teacher preparedness, policy support, resource availability, and epistemic orientation.

There was a total of 17 focus groups (n=17), with each group consisting of an average of five teachers. The questionnaires and interviews were designed in line with the research questions of this study and were intended to further ascertain participants' demographic profiles and teaching experience. The selection of these teachers was based on their experiences of teaching a variety of subjects in public primary schools. These experiences placed them in a suitable position to engage critically with curricula and pedagogical approaches related to the decolonisation of education as they understood it. Participants were primarily teaching the following school subjects in the Foundation Phase: Languages, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Life Orientation, Arts and Culture, and Technology.

The majority of the participants were female teachers (74.5%), followed by male teachers (23.5%). A significant proportion of the participants were aged between 45 and 54 (31.5%), followed by 55+ (26.2%), 25-34 (25.5%), 35-44 (14.8%), and teachers under the age of 25 (2%). Teaching experience varied widely, with 33.3% having over 20 years of experience, followed by equal proportions of participants of 24% each who indicated having had experience between 0 and 5 years and between 6 and 10 years. This was followed by smaller proportions who indicated having had 11-15 years (11.3%) and 16-20 years (7.3%) of teaching experience. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants' demographic characteristics.

Table 1: Summary of Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Category	Group	Frequency
Age group of participants	Under 25	3
	25-34	38
	35-44	22
	45-54	47
	55+	39
	Total	149
	Missing	1
	Grand Total	150
Gender of participants	Male	35
	Female	111
	Prefer not to say	2
	Total	148
	Missing	2
	Grand Total	150
Years of teaching experience	0-5	36
	6-10	36
	11-15	17
	16-20	11
	Over 20 years	50
	Total	150

All participants were assured that their participation in the study was voluntary, anonymous and confidential. The Faculty of Education's Research Ethics Committee endorsed the study, and ethical issues were considered throughout the research procedure. This was followed by ethics approval by the relevant provincial Department of Basic Education to allow research to be conducted at the selected public primary schools. Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants.

Concerning data analysis, quantitative data were analysed first using the software SPSS to determine the frequencies for particular variables in relation to the research questions. The reliability of the five-item scale measuring the sample of in-service teachers' perceptions of curriculum decolonisation was examined using Cronbach's alpha. The scale achieved an acceptable reliability coefficient ($\alpha=0.704$), which is above the minimum value of .70 considered to have satisfactory reliability as recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). This further indicates that the items were sufficiently interrelated to form a coherent measure of perceived preparedness and systemic support for decolonisation.

Based on the results from the questionnaires, all participants were invited to be part of the focus group interviews, which were intended to provide detailed, nuanced insights into the quantitative results to which they had contributed. The data from the focus group interviews were analysed using the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software, ATLAS.ti, where specific themes were

developed. Themes which emerged from the focus group interviews were used to explain, elaborate on, and contextualise patterns identified in the survey data.

4. Findings

4.1 Teacher preparedness, training, resources, and support structures

With reference to the question posed in the questionnaire: 'Are teachers adequately prepared to implement a decolonised curriculum in their classrooms', the results from Figure 1 confirm that the majority of respondents indicated an optimistic perspective regarding the perceived preparedness of teachers to implement a decolonised curriculum across various subjects. However, the results also show that a relatively small number of respondents remained neutral, while a small number of respondents disagreed. The findings suggest that while teachers generally perceive themselves as prepared, this level of confidence is not unequivocal.

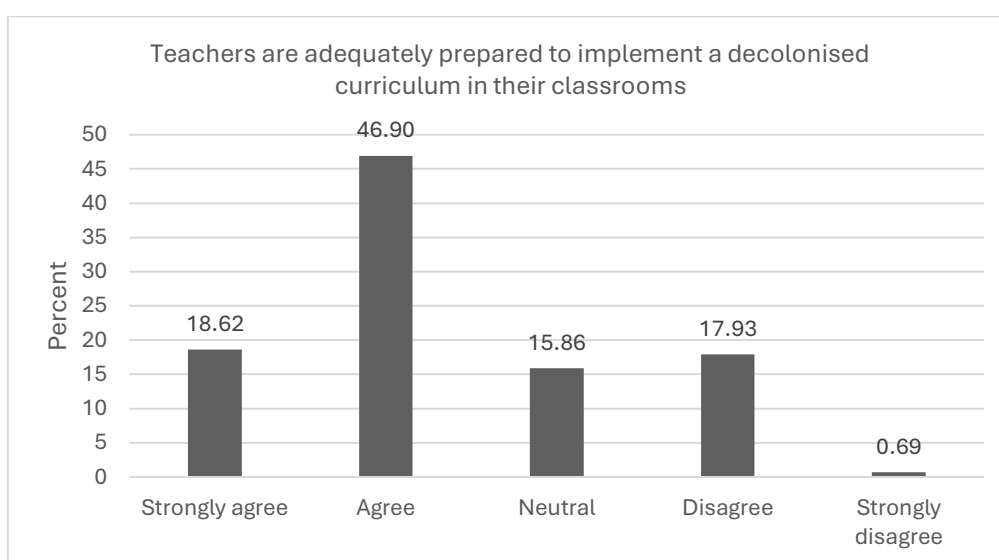


Figure 1: Teachers' Perceptions of Their Preparedness to Implement a Decolonised Curriculum

With reference to the cross-tabulated data in Table 2, showing participant teachers perceived preparedness to implement a decolonised curriculum across subjects, there is a notable variation across the subjects.

Table 2: Teachers' Perceived Preparedness to Implement a Decolonised Curriculum Across Subjects

Subject	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total (n)
Languages	15 (19.74%)	37 (48.68%)	16 (21.05%)	8 (10.53%)	0 (0.00%)	76
Mathematics	18 (18.95%)	45 (47.37%)	17 (17.89%)	15 (15.79%)	0 (0.00%)	95
Natural Sciences	5 (11.90%)	22 (52.38%)	4 (9.52%)	11 (26.19%)	0 (0.00%)	42
Life Orientation	6 (17.65%)	17 (50.00%)	4 (11.76%)	7 (20.59%)	0 (0.00%)	34
Arts and Culture	8 (19.05%)	19 (45.24%)	6 (14.29%)	8 (19.05%)	1 (2.38%)	42
Technology	3 (17.65%)	6 (35.29%)	2 (11.76%)	6 (35.29%)	0 (0.00%)	17
Other	1 (16.67%)	2 (33.33%)	1 (16.67%)	2 (33.33%)	0 (0.00%)	6

The findings indicate a moderate to high level of confidence in implementing a decolonised curriculum among the respondents; however, this confidence varies depending on the subject area. Teachers in Languages and Mathematics expressed the strongest sense of preparedness. The same positive trend was observed in Mathematics. However, despite the general confidence in teachers' preparedness, there are still uncertainties concerning Mathematics. In contrast, teachers in Natural Sciences and Technology reported lower levels of agreement and higher levels of uncertainty. However, a significant number of participants disagreed and remained neutral. This implies a higher level of scepticism regarding participants perceived preparedness of teachers for this in Natural Science classrooms.

Similarly, Technology teachers demonstrated the lowest overall confidence. This is one of the lowest levels of perceived readiness among the subject areas and may indicate perceived challenges present in aligning the Technology curriculum with decolonisation aims. The subjects Life Orientation and Arts and Culture demonstrated that the preparedness levels among the teachers were generally favourable, albeit with variations. Although the results signify considerable confidence in teachers' preparedness, in contrast, there was a substantial concern expressed by a minority of participants. In the 'Other' category, which comprised six respondents, although the small sample size limits conclusions, there was a degree of variability in perceptions across less commonly specified subjects. In sum, the results show that teachers in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Languages, Life Orientation, Arts and Culture) perceived themselves as better positioned to implement decolonised approaches.

In contrast, those in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, in particular, Natural Sciences and Technology, demonstrated comparatively lower confidence levels. However, Mathematics appeared to reflect relatively strong levels of agreement, which suggests that the teachers may have used opportunities to integrate decolonial practices through context-based examples, culturally relevant problem-solving, or locally grounded pedagogical approaches. The findings further imply that disciplinary epistemologies and institutional support structures influence how decolonisation is understood and enacted across the curriculum. To further corroborate the results shown in Figure 1, with reference to the survey question: 'Do national teaching guidelines encourage decolonisation of the curriculum through innovative teaching methods?', the results from Figure 2 depict diverse levels of agreement, with most responses leaning towards agreement. However, a degree of neutrality and disagreement is also significantly evident.

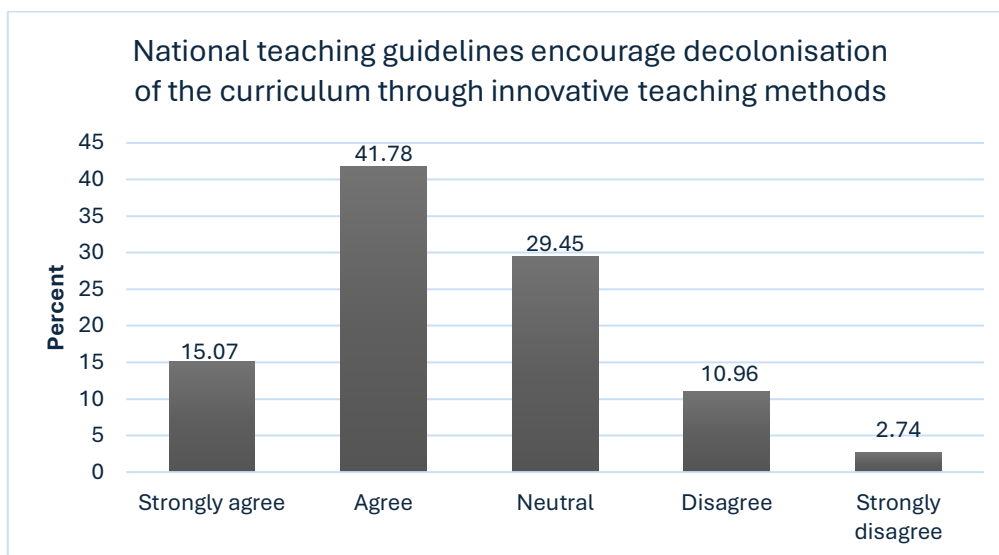


Figure 2: Perceptions of National Guidelines Promoting Decolonisation Through Innovative Pedagogy

Table 3 shows participating teachers' perceptions of whether the national teaching guidelines encourage decolonisation of teaching through innovative methods, regarding the particular subject areas. The results indicate a generally positive response to the statement; however, there is clear variation across the subjects.

Table 3: Teachers' Perceptions of National Teaching Guidelines Encouraging Decolonisation Through Innovative Methods

Subject	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total (n)
Languages	13 (17.33%)	29 (38.67%)	26 (34.67%)	5 (6.67%)	2 (2.67%)	75
Mathematics	17 (17.89%)	37 (38.95%)	28 (29.47%)	11 (11.58%)	2 (2.11%)	95
Natural Sciences	1 (2.33%)	19 (44.19%)	12 (27.91%)	9 (20.93%)	2 (4.65%)	43
Life Orientation	4 (11.43%)	17 (48.57%)	8 (22.86%)	5 (14.29%)	1 (2.86%)	35
Arts and Culture	6 (13.95%)	20 (46.51%)	12 (27.91%)	5 (11.63%)	0 (0.00%)	43
Technology	3 (17.65%)	6 (35.29%)	6 (35.29%)	2 (11.76%)	0 (0.00%)	17
Other	1 (16.67%)	3 (50.00%)	2 (33.33%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	6

Teachers in Mathematics and Languages had the highest degree of agreement. Notably, in both subjects, a considerable percentage of respondents remained neutral. This indicates a level of ambiguity or ambivalence about the use of these guidelines in classroom practice, where teachers may recognise the value of decolonisation but remain unsure about the pedagogical tools needed to enact it. The findings may indicate increased reservations on the part of participants about the efficacy, in practice, of the national teaching guidelines that advocate for the decolonisation of the curriculum through innovative pedagogical approaches.

Subjects in the Humanities and Social Sciences, such as Life Orientation and Arts and Culture, show significant agreement. Given that these subjects intrinsically include values, identity, and cultural expression, they may be more naturally associated with the ideas of decolonisation. The high agreement levels across these subjects suggest a strong correlation between the cultural embeddedness of the respective subjects and teachers' perceived readiness to adopt decolonial pedagogical methods.

In stark contrast, the participants' responses to STEM disciplines, Natural Sciences and Technology indicate lower support for decolonisation within national guidelines. The findings may indicate perceived challenges in aligning mainstream Western scientific and technological knowledge systems and practices with the aims of decolonisation. The high neutrality rates may further imply policy ambiguity or limited professional support, in particular, how decolonisation practices are operationalised within STEM disciplines. Moreover, while degrees of agreement differ, a noticeable pattern across all participants is the prevalence of neutral responses. This is particularly significant in subject areas, such as Languages and Mathematics, possibly indicating unclear policy communication or inadequate professional development opportunities for teachers to comprehend and apply decolonial pedagogies effectively. Although not statistically significant, the few responses in the 'Other' category may suggest the marginalisation of specific subjects in debates around curriculum transformation.

In sum, the results suggest a patterned relationship between subject areas and teachers' perceptions of policy alignment with decolonial aims. Humanities and Social Science disciplines, such as Languages, Arts and Culture, and Life Orientation, displayed the highest endorsement of decolonisation. This is in contrast to STEM disciplines, such as Natural Sciences and Technology, which show a lower alignment with and uncertainty concerning decolonised practices. Despite being a STEM discipline, Mathematics aligns more closely with the positive trend than with the lower confidence levels seen in Natural Sciences and Technology. This suggests that teachers may recognise the flexibility in application concerning Mathematics and its potential to embed contextual and culturally responsive examples. In addition, teachers in Natural Sciences and Technology may experience these subjects as more closely aligned to Western paradigms, leaving little space for alternative knowledge systems.

To further corroborate the survey results, the participants in focus groups were invited to respond to the interview question: 'Are you prepared to employ decolonised teaching practices in your classroom?' The teachers in the focus group interviews expressed diverse perspectives and views concerning their own preparedness to employ decolonised teaching practices in the classroom. While many expressed their willingness, this was often conditional on receiving adequate support, training, and clear guidelines around implementing the kind of decolonised curriculum which resonates with the current literature (De Beer & Petersen, 2016; Govender, 2018; Mudaly, 2018; Tibbitts & Weldon, 2017). The following participants commented:

"So, I teach grade 1, grade Rs. Like these learners understand, but there is a breakdown or a better, like a guide per se, as to what needs to be done, then of course, yes" (Sipho in School 1)

"I am prepared, provided there's ongoing training to help me understand and apply these practices. As an open-minded teacher, adapting to a new approach isn't difficult for me, especially if it helps students connect to the world, they're living in." (Nokuthula in School 2)

"I don't have a problem if I'm thoroughly trained to do it. I need training and exposure; I will know what is required of it." (Lungile in School 3)

"Yes, I'm prepared, but there must still be a plan in place." (Thandeka in School 4)

Some participants believed they were already implementing aspects of a decolonised curriculum through their own values, cultural understanding, and efforts to make learning relevant to their students' contexts. These findings resonate with Vandeyar (2019) who describes the significance of teachers' own schooling experiences, observed classroom practices, and family and community responses to diversity, all of which result in the development of their individual belief systems and those of their learners. The results suggest a degree of existing alignment with the principles of decolonisation, even if not formally labelled as such. At least three participants suggested they were already incorporating aspects aligned with decolonised teaching in their classrooms:

"So, when I was teaching apartheid or whatever, then you become emotional because we all were affected. We were all victims of this for almost 50 years of apartheid, with our ancestors four hundred years of colonisation. So, you bring in your own passion to the lesson, and so I would say that if you think of it, you know, it's not just a robotic process where a teacher just looks at what's been given and dishes it out. The way you deliver that curriculum in the class every day is absolutely coming from the human that's inside of you. So, I would say that the problem is not the educator because the educator understands that there are problems with the system, but what underlies every single lesson is the values. So, in every single lesson, we are still promoting respect and tolerance and love for each other, which is very much postcolonial and post-apartheid." (Bongani in School 4)

Certain teachers (Nomisa, Sizwe and Zanele) pragmatically use language as a means of communicating with their students, which, as Lebeloane (2017) argues, remains a significant teaching strategy towards decolonising the curriculum:

"Including learners' home languages can be very effective. For example, I used Xhosa flashcards in class, and students showed great interest when I engaged with them in their language. It made them feel included and valued. Small gestures, like greeting students in their language or incorporating it into lessons, can foster a sense of belonging." (Nomisa in School 4)

"Most of my learners are Xhosa speaking. To help them understand lessons in English, which is the medium of instruction, I often translate them into Xhosa first. This helps bridge the gap, as many don't speak English at home. I also ensure that English-speaking learners aren't left behind." (Sizwe in School 1)

"We've been doing shapes. I will take them for a walk outside, and I'll show them the different shapes. You'll get your stop signs and look at this little JoJo thing, with different shapes. So, I try and bring these into it. That is how I play around." (Zanele in School 1)

One teacher (Khaya in School 2) who teaches Creative Arts and Xhosa described holding cultural events where traditions from various groups are discussed, and she encouraged students to dress in attire from their respective cultures for Heritage Day. This practice incorporated a diversity of cultural perspectives and identities into the learning environment. The findings resonate with Mudaly (2018) regarding the significance of a culturally responsive curriculum that addresses the needs, knowledge, and cultures of local communities. Khaya in School 2 explained:

"We hold cultural events where we discuss traditions from various groups, for example, how Indian, Zulu, or Xhosa communities celebrate holidays. This approach helps students understand that we're all different but can work together, appreciating each other's backgrounds. For Heritage Day, we encourage students to dress in attire from their respective cultures to celebrate the diversity within our school." (Khaya in School 2)

Another teacher (Ayanda in School 1) described how they adapted their Mathematics teaching by contextualising it in relation to the contexts of their learners:

"My teaching incorporates cultural perspectives when it comes to Mathematics. For example, what they're trying to do is, I try to make it as alive as possible and incorporate daily things that they use, plus to make them think that this is a subject that's alive. Being addicted to it, like the taxis, they can't relate to the taxi, and we all play the taxi, and I play with them." (Ayanda in School 1)

While there was a generally optimistic perspective among participants around how current teachers are employing decolonised practices, in contrast, two teachers (Nosipho and Themba) explicitly stated they were inadequately prepared to implement decolonised practices:

"I'm not sure if I'm fully prepared yet." (Nosipho in School 1)

"We are not very prepared. Because, even in our institutions, you will determine that this person has this kind of information about religion. This one has this kind of information about the same religion. Like, we are adults, and we do not understand ourselves. We should. Maybe we do not know ourselves like we should." (Themba in School 2)

In sum, the findings suggest that while teachers demonstrated a willingness to adopt decolonised practices, these are often conditional on access to training, clarity of expectations, and institutional support. By implication, teacher autonomy alone is inadequate without coordinated policy and professional development.

4.2 Barriers, resistance, lack of institutional support, and resource limitations

With reference to the survey question: “Are teachers provided with sufficient resources to support the implementation of a decolonised curriculum?”, the results from Figure 3 indicate that the majority of respondents expressed a generally positive perception regarding the adequacy of resources available to support the implementation process. However, while there is a general perception of adequacy, it is not overwhelmingly strong. Several respondents remained neutral, which may indicate inconsistencies across schools, provinces, or types of institutions, possibly reflecting broader systemic challenges in policy implementation. Similarly, a high number of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, highlighting a significant level of dissatisfaction among participants or a perception of inadequate resource support. Three participants did not respond to the question.

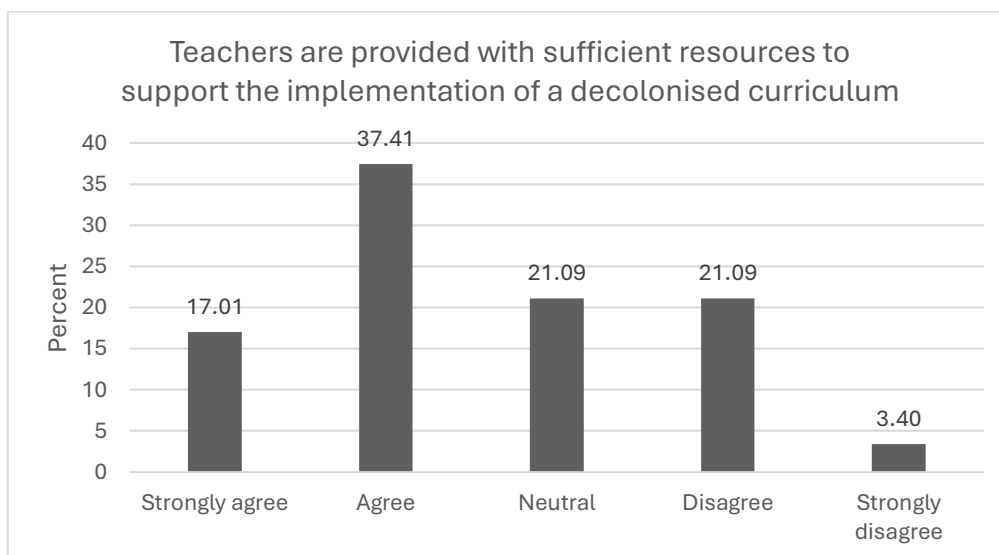


Figure 3: Perceptions of Resource Availability for Implementing a Decolonised Curriculum

With reference to the survey question: “Are efforts to decolonise education adequately supported by educational leadership and policy?”, the results from Figure 4 indicate a generally positive perception among respondents, with the majority affirming that leadership and policy structures do provide some degree of support for decolonisation efforts in education. However, a significant number of respondents, remained neutral, indicating a degree of uncertainty regarding the effectiveness or visibility of leadership and policy support. This neutrality may reflect varied experiences across schools or a lack of clarity about how policy intentions could be or are being translated into actionable support mechanisms. A relatively small number of respondents disagreed with the notion that

decolonisation efforts are adequately supported by policy and leadership structures.

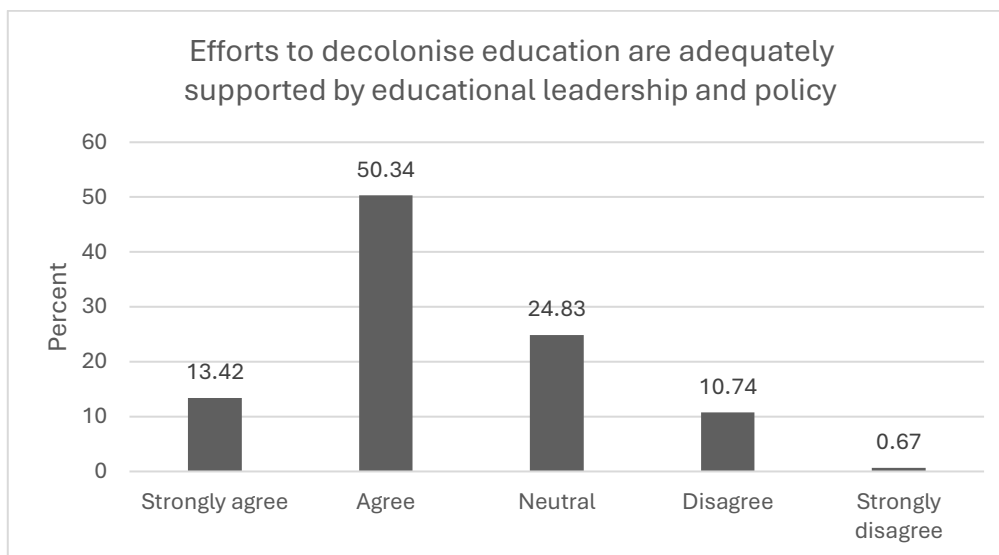


Figure 4: Perceptions of Leadership and Policy Support for Decolonising Education

With reference to the survey question, “*Is there a clear commitment to continuing the decolonisation process in education from all stakeholders?*”, the results from Figure 5 suggest a generally positive perception among respondents. However, there are notable levels of neutrality and disagreement. This may reflect uneven experiences across institutions or a lack of visibility of stakeholder engagement. A smaller, yet significant, proportion of participants expressed disagreement, suggesting these respondents questioned the consistency or sincerity of commitment from all stakeholders.

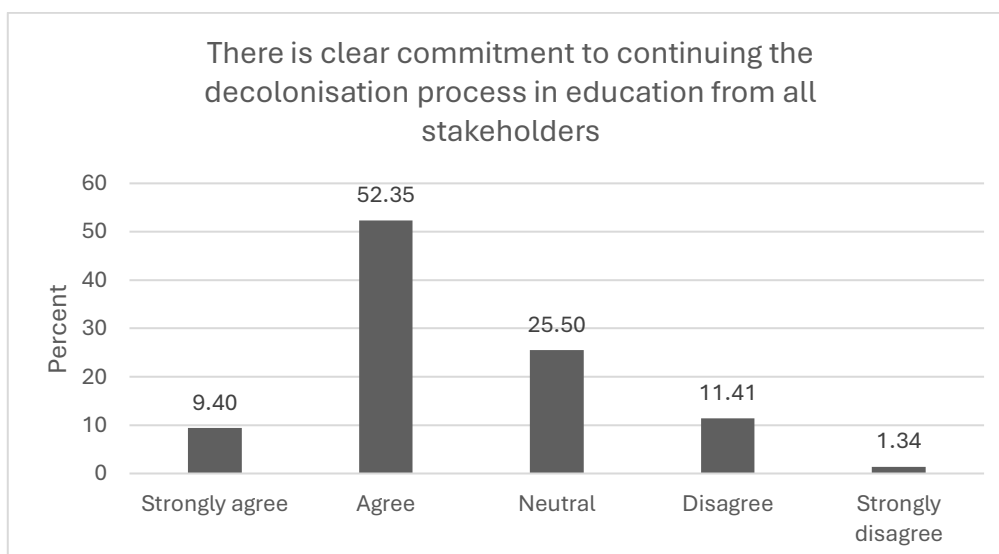


Figure 5: Perceptions of Stakeholder Commitment to the Decolonisation of Education

To further corroborate the survey results, the participants in focus groups were invited to respond to the interview question: "What problems do you anticipate facing while adopting a decolonised curriculum in your classroom?" Certain teachers in the focus group interviews identified several problems related to adopting a decolonised curriculum in the classroom. These teachers (Xolani, Lindiwe, Nokulunga and Mandla) claimed that structural and systemic constraints prohibit the integration of decolonised practices. They maintained that bureaucratic policies around adhering to the CAPS, together with the rigidity of the curriculum itself, inhibit flexibility and promote meritocratic performance in schools.

These findings resonate with those of Lockett (2016), who submits that, as long as students are assessed based on the kind of narrow, competitive, individualised performance that is framed within hegemonic discourses, such students are unlikely to excel. The participant teachers in the present study commented on this particular issue:

"Remember the kids are at different levels. They have certain levels. If they can just maybe, they mustn't tell us we are giving you maybe two weeks to finish this. They must give us enough time, maybe for a month, to drill the concept. Because the problem is, according to ATP, we must finish this quickly, quickly, quickly. So, the kids are failing. They are not understanding." (Xolani in School 1)

"There's also the issue of conflicting expectations. For example, if the curriculum allows flexibility, but curriculum advisors or the Department demand adherence to strict guidelines, this creates a disconnect. It would require systemic changes, including higher-level support, to make decolonisation practical." (Lindiwe in School 4)

"... But also, the teachers are not allowed to explore beyond the parameters. Now we find that children's intelligence is also stifled. They are not given the freedom to think, explore, and see bigger than just a book." (Nokulunga in School 4)

"Decolonising the curriculum also raises questions about collaboration. My teaching partner and I work closely; if I teach a topic today, she follows up tomorrow, and we stay aligned. But if decolonisation means each teacher pursues different topics based on their class's interests, it could lead to inconsistencies." (Mandla in School 4)

Zukiswa from School 3 made important claims concerning the risk of political agendas manipulating educational challenges towards racialising schools, and the lack of uniformity around schools through policy implementation inconsistencies:

"Political interference will come into play; that is what I suspect because they start using it as a racial thing. Why is this school functioning like this? Why is the other school like this? Once things have equalised, there will be policies guiding the school, but even now, equality has been involved. We are a public school, but we do not function similarly. For example, let us use corporal punishment. We know it was abolished long

ago, but you will find it is still alive if you go to some schools; it is still 100% alive.” (Zukiswa in School 3)

Maluleka and Ramoupi (2021) postulate that teachers who were shaped by pre-1994 colonial-apartheid education were inadequately prepared by the democratically elected government to unlearn internalised colonial attitudes, particularly in peri-urban and rural schools. These thoughts resonate with Zukiswa’s comments concerning corporal punishment, which is still used in certain schools.

Teachers (Andile and Sibongile) emphasised that outdated resources and inadequate support from the government hinder efforts to decolonise the curriculum, as teachers are not likely to have the kind of guidance which will substantially help them to implement a decolonised curriculum and pedagogy effectively. These findings resonate with the current literature, whose authors argue that decolonising the medium of instruction requires considerable investment in infrastructure and resources (Mutongoza et al., 2023; Zawada, 2020). The participant teachers commented:

“Our government and the Department of Education may struggle to provide the necessary training and materials for teachers. Decolonising the curriculum is ongoing, so every time we introduce a new topic, it needs updated resources and materials that fit the new framework.” (Andile in School 2)

“Like the textbooks we use now are [those recommended by] CAPS, and CAPS was implemented, we did teacher training in 2011, and it was implemented in 2012. So, all our books for CAPS, if you look at the data publication, it’ll say 2011 or 2012, which is 12 years old. The content we are teaching in the classroom is for 12-year-olds. It’s already outdated.” (Sibongile in School 4)

Certain teachers highlight that language barriers pose a significant challenge in decolonising educational practices. These sentiments resonate with the argument put forward by Pretorius and Murray (2023) who argue that learners cannot be expected to become proficient in English if they cannot comprehend the most frequently spoken words in English. These participating teachers (Nomfundo, Gugulethu, Thulani) commented on the LoLT issue:

“I don’t think it will work in our classrooms because, in our schools, we are looking at the medium of instruction. For instance, here we are, the Xhosa people. So, the language that we are teaching, or we are emphasising isiXhosa. Although we are teaching them in English for other languages, we are emphasising isiXhosa.” (Nomfundo in School 3)

“Some students are working with English as their third language while still learning Afrikaans, which can make things even more difficult. The expectations placed on us as teachers often feel overwhelming.” (Gugulethu in School 4)

"It can be tricky with languages because, if they need help understanding English, and this is an English-speaking school, then there will always be a problem for me. English is our mainstream, and I struggle with that as well." (Thulani in School 4)

One teacher (Sibusiso in School 3) highlighted that decolonising education practices cannot succeed without broader community and parental engagement. The teacher alluded to the ways in which this absence of support undermines learner motivation as parents are unable or unwilling to support their children's learning:

"Parents need to be workshopped, yes, they need to be workshopped or trained because we try to involve them as teachers so that there will be parent involvement. But sometimes, yes, we call them, and they come, but they are helpless. They will tell me or a teacher: 'No, you must give him [the learner] a hiding'. We always tell them that it is illegal. So, I think parents should also be involved in workshops because the system talks about the teacher, the learner and the parent." (Sibusiso in School 3)

In sum, the findings suggest that while elements of support for the decolonisation of education may exist, they are unevenly distributed and inconsistently experienced. In this regard, policies and resources may be present but lack sufficient clarity to support effective implementation.

5. Discussion

The aims of this study were twofold: first, to examine the extent to which teachers are trained and supported to implement a decolonised curriculum, including the resources available to them; and second, to identify the systemic and institutional challenges that hinder teachers from effectively implementing a decolonised curriculum in schools. With reference to the first aim, the results confirm a generally optimistic outlook on the part of the sampled participants towards in-service teachers' preparedness for decolonising education; however, these optimistic views appear to be attributed to specific factors, including the nature of the discipline and the absence of systemic and instructional barriers.

Concerning particular subjects, such as Languages and Mathematics, participants' responses confirmed high levels of agreement, while Natural Sciences and Technology showed lower levels of agreement among participants. It was surprising that the latter two subjects showed results which contrasted with those for Mathematics and Languages, given the fact that Mathematics forms part of the STEM domain. Responses for Arts and Culture and Life Orientation were favourable concerning the perceived preparedness of teachers, which suggests that these subjects are inherently aligned with cultural expression and identity. The findings further extend existing research by explicating that decolonisation cannot be uniformly enacted across diverse subjects but rather mediated by the epistemological boundaries and pedagogical practices of each discipline.

Overall, concerning the systemic and instructional barriers, the results further confirm a degree of participant uncertainty and their perceptions of inadequate guidance, which point to a policy-practice gap. In particular, participants reported

both a lack of awareness and clarity regarding how national policies translate into classroom practice and inadequate training. The results further point to the fact that certain participant teachers may have ambiguities around what decolonisation of education entails. The number of neutral responses could indicate this. These findings further corroborate concerns in the existing literature (Lockett, 2016; Mahabeer, 2020; Zawada, 2020) concerning the disjuncture between policy and practice.

With reference to the second aim, while the results broadly demonstrate a degree of agreement that some resources, for instance, policy support, and stakeholder commitment exist for implementing a decolonised curriculum, they simultaneously reveal notable neutrality and uncertainty. Systemic constraints in schools, as a result of bureaucratic government policies, resource inadequacy, language barriers, political influences, and inadequate stakeholder engagement with communities, schools and the government, were revealed by participants as significant barriers to the realisation of decolonised practices in schools.

These findings confirm existing research (Domínguez, 2020; Harvey & Russell-Mundine, 2018; Lebeloane, 2017; Mahabeer, 2020; Pretorius & Murray, 2023), which underscores the challenges teachers face in implementing decolonised practices. However, the findings further extend the existing research by suggesting that uncertainty among teachers transcends beyond a mere lack of knowledge, but rather a reflection of the deep structural ambiguities concerning how decolonisation is communicated and operationalised within current policies.

There are further implications of this study for both policy and practice in the short, medium and long-term:

In the short-term, readiness to implement decolonised practices among teachers requires subject-specific and contextually grounded capacity development programmes. It is evident from the results that, while certain disciplines, such as the Arts and Life Orientation, were, according to the participants, relatively more adaptable to decolonial practices than others, continuous professional development initiatives need to centre on all disciplines. This is particularly the case where Western/European epistemologies continue to control the rhetoric, which, by implication, presents a significant challenge to the production of knowledge from local contexts (Heleta, 2016, 2024).

In the medium-term, while the results confirmed a degree of uncertainty concerning policy interpretation and practical application of decolonised practices, they indicate a need for updated and comprehensive teacher education policy guidelines. In particular, these guidelines should aim to ensure that policy language is not merely understood by teachers and school leaders through policy dissemination but is translatable into daily pedagogical practices through a process of co-creation with all significant stakeholders. These would include school management, teachers, learners, parents, and the community. There is the continued risk of decolonised practices being diluted under the guise of transformation, whereby curricula renewal happens superficially through the addition of, for instance, an African scholar to text-based content (Vandeyar, 2019;

Zembylas, 2018). The design of teacher curricula should not mean “add-ons” but should centre on specific ways in which capacities of prospective teachers are developed and encouraged to critique colonial structures, to reclaim IKS and to dismantle policies driven by neoliberal ideologies disconnected from their individual or communal values (Fataar, 2018). While the results of this present study confirm that certain teachers in the sample were already integrating culturally relevant, inclusive and contextualised pedagogical strategies, there remains an urgent need for teacher education institutions in South Africa to collaborate with stakeholders in a process of redesigning teacher education curricula that are both theoretically informed and practically orientated.

In the long-term, policy reform needs to shift beyond superficial endorsement of the decolonisation of education to genuinely working towards the redesign of curricula with school leaders, teachers, and students afforded more autonomy. Any form of rigid control of teachers through curriculum and other policies legislated by the government renders teacher’s passive through compliance (Mahabeer, 2020). A decolonised education system needs, therefore, to adopt a holistic approach that values the experiences of teachers and learners, their emotions, cultural backgrounds, and their languages instead of adhering to mere policy compliance. The use of dominant languages in schools continues to disconnect learners from their mother tongue languages and, in turn, from their identities and backgrounds.

This represents a significant challenge towards promoting meaningful engagement in classes. The decolonisation of education needs to transcend its current symbolic form towards actively promoting and supporting both multilingual education in schools and the integration of IKS as a move towards creating curricula which are accessible and meaningful to all learners. While teaching students in their mother tongue beyond the Foundation Phase has been confirmed by the teachers participating in this study to be beneficial towards decolonising their practices, the promotion of African languages should be centred on assessing students in their mother tongue languages (Maluleke, 2019; Manel et al., 2019).

In addition, while language is only one dimension of a process of enabling decolonising practices, spaces should be further developed for teachers and students to critically reflect on their own positionalities, identities and histories. This initiative represents an emotional investment in such forms of learning and teaching. By implication, any decolonised practices would need to promote some form of discomfort to the extent that teachers and students become consciously aware of their own biases (Waghid, 2018a; Waghid, 2018b). Thus, to safeguard the integrity of decolonisation, stakeholders would need to frame the discourse around epistemic justice, transparency, equity and inclusivity, and the democratisation of educational processes designed to ensure that students, teachers and the community’s voices are heard in the implementation process.

6. Conclusion

The results suggest a generally optimistic outlook on the part of the sampled participants towards the adequacy of their and other teachers' preparedness for decolonising education in practical and meaningful ways. However, the challenges impeding this appear from participants' responses to be attributed to specific factors. According to the findings, six interrelated critical factors are perceived to inhibit, or have the potential to inhibit, the promotion of decolonised practices in schools. These include: rigid and outdated bureaucratic governmental policies that inhibit teacher agency, flexibility and creativity; inadequate professional development which is unrelated to the real needs of teachers and learners together with inadequate resources in schools; limited linguistic diversity, or recognition of this, in schools; political influences; and inadequate stakeholder engagement between schools, parents, communities and the government.

This research had certain limitations. First, while the study exclusively focused on teachers in the Foundation Phase, the results cannot be generalised. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of the contextual realities of the sample teachers rather than as broadly representative of all teachers across the various phases in South African schools. Second, while the results demonstrate a contrast between the questionnaire results and those from the interviews concerning participants' perceptions of their and other teachers' preparedness, further research is needed to expand on what this preparedness entails in practice and how such practice evolves across different school contexts.

Third, given that the research was conducted mainly in historically poor public schools in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, it would benefit from further exploration of the ways in which public schools in other demographic areas and provinces are, or are not, working towards decolonising their pedagogical practices. There is a further need for comparative exploration of the specific ways in which schools in both developing and developed contexts are working towards decolonising their curricula.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author declares that no potential conflicts of interest exist concerning this article.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Cape Peninsula University of Technology Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (Approval No: EFEC 3-5/2017) and the Western Cape Education Department (Approval No: 20210727-4678).

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