

Reimagining Educational Psychologist Training Through Curriculum Decolonisation: An Exploratory Qualitative Study at a Rural Comprehensive University

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Abstract

Curriculum decolonisation has gained momentum as a means of transforming post-colonial and post-apartheid education, especially in rural comprehensive universities. Situated within this discourse, this study reimagines educational psychologist training by exploring curriculum decolonisation at a rural comprehensive South African university. An exploratory qualitative design with thematic analysis paradigm was employed to examine the experiences of eight first-year educational psychology trainees. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires and were thematically analysed using the complementary lenses of Africanisation and internationalisation. Africanisation foregrounded African-centred epistemologies, cultural meanings, and historical contexts, while internationalisation situated these perspectives within broader global debates on curriculum reform and professional training. The findings in this study reveal that curriculum decolonisation is understood by participants as a necessary and transformative process for addressing historical inequities and advancing social justice. However, their understandings remain diverse and sometimes contested, reflecting the complexity of translating decolonial principles into practice. Participants emphasised the need for contextually relevant and culturally responsive curricula, supported by stronger institutional commitment. Drawing on participants' experiences, this study contributes to reimagining educational psychologist training through curriculum decolonisation by identifying pathways for integrating decolonial principles into curriculum design and practice within a rural comprehensive university context.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the call for curriculum decolonisation has gained significant momentum within global academic discourse. This movement seeks to dismantle post-colonial and post-apartheid educational structures that have historically reproduced exclusion, inequality, and epistemic injustice (Heleta, 2018; Ramonyai et al., 2022). Within colonial and apartheid-era universities, curricula were predominantly shaped by Eurocentric knowledge systems that reinforced racial hierarchies and marginalised Black South Africans. For example, disciplines such as history and sociology often centred European experiences while presenting African societies as “tribal” or “primitive”; (Miller, 1999). This explains that psychology largely relied on Western theories developed in Euro-American contexts with minimal consideration of African worldviews; and language policies privileged English and Afrikaans as languages of instruction, limiting access and epistemic participation for many Black students (Heleta, 2018). Consequently, South African higher education continues to reflect persistent structural inequalities in knowledge production and representation (Shay, 2015).

Although curriculum decolonisation has received considerable attention at policy and institutional levels, most of the existing literature focuses on structural changes rather than the experiences of students involved in these processes. In particular, there is limited empirical research on how students especially those in professional training programmes such as educational psychology understands and experience curriculum decolonisation in practice. Maine (2022) highlights the importance of centring student voices in decolonial discourse, while Shay (2015) argues that the inclusion of African student perspectives in curriculum transformation is still underdeveloped in both research and practice. Taken together, these studies reveal a significant gap in understanding how first-year educational psychology students at rural comprehensive universities experience and interpret curriculum decolonisation. This study aims to address this gap by foregrounding the experiences and interpretations of first-year educational psychology students regarding curriculum decolonisation. This is important because these students are both recipients of ongoing curriculum reforms and future practitioners in educational settings, yet their perspectives remain largely underrepresented in decolonial scholarship.

Against this background, this study explores how first-year educational psychology students at a rural comprehensive university experience and interpret curriculum decolonisation. The study is guided by the following research question: How do first-year educational psychology students at a rural comprehensive university perceive the decolonisation of the curriculum?

Literature Review

Background to Decolonisation of the Curriculum

As the curriculum is primarily responsible for educating and training future educators (Plaatjie, 2021), there is growing recognition of the need for a decolonized curriculum that offers all South African students, including those training as psychologists, equal access to quality education. The movement to dismantle Eurocentric

hegemony and decolonize higher education, which was notably propelled by students in 2015, reflects ongoing struggles against white supremacy and racist structures in both South Africa and the United States (Tella, 2021). These movements signify sporadic uprisings against the lingering influence of colonial empires (Le Grange, 2019).

Despite strides made since South Africa's transition to democracy in the 1990s, South African universities still largely reflect Western hegemony, perpetuating exclusion and marginalization. This reality underscores the need for a comprehensive decolonisation of university curricula (Tella, 2021) and calls for a shift from colonial to decolonial approaches to institutional support and development. Several studies suggest that a decolonized curriculum should place South Africa and Africa at the centre of teaching, learning, and research (Heleta, 2018), focusing on reimagining structures, iconography, the democratization of access, and challenging systems of authoritative control (Mbebe, 2016, p. 30). Luckett and Shay (2017) advocate for decolonisation as a transformative approach toward reframing the curriculum. According to Manathunga (2020), this transformative approach must encompass all facets of higher education, with educators and professional psychologists playing a pivotal role in shaping inclusive learning environments. Similarly, Du Plessis (2021) highlights the importance of professional educators taking the lead in decolonizing curricula, as they are crucial agents of change.

While compelling arguments exist for the significance of decolonizing university curricula, there has been limited consideration of the perspectives of those training as psychologists, particularly at rural comprehensive universities. These institutions, often situated in rural contexts, are typically less developed than their urban counterparts and serve marginalized communities (Damoah et al., 2023). Trainee psychologists in these rural institutions face additional challenges due to inadequate teaching and learning resources (Heleta, 2018). This is especially true for institutions like the University where this study was conducted. There is a prevailing notion that rural communities, which are home to many rural comprehensive universities, are underprivileged and unable to contribute meaningfully to their development (Damoah et al., 2023). However, training in these institutions plays a crucial role in the country's economic development and increasing literacy among Black South Africans.

To address the gap in understanding how future educational psychologists perceive and can contribute to curriculum decolonisation, this article seeks to answer the question: "How do first-year educational psychology students at a rural comprehensive university perceive the decolonisation of the curriculum?" By examining possible answers, this paper aims to explore the experiences of trainee psychologists, identify the challenges they face, and propose adaptations to better prepare them for this critical task. By amplifying their voices, this paper seeks to possibly contribute to enrich ongoing conversations on educational reform and support efforts to create a truly inclusive academic landscape that embraces Africanisation and internationalisation.

Africanisation and Internationalisation as Dynamic Transactional Processes of Curriculum Decolonisation

The decolonisation of the curriculum has emerged as a pivotal issue within South African universities, reflecting a broader demand for systemic reform to address the needs of historically marginalized groups (Masenya, 2021). Despite extensive discussions on the challenges faced by these institutions, there is a notable gap in literature addressing the colonizing tendencies within the training of psychologists and the integration of diverse epistemologies. To achieve a genuinely decolonized curriculum, particularly in the training of psychologists in rural comprehensive contexts, it is crucial to adopt a nuanced approach that aligns the curriculum with local contexts (Mahabeer, 2018). This approach necessitates a dual focus on both Africanisation and internationalisation—processes that not only acknowledge but actively incorporate diverse perspectives and respond to the needs of varied populations (Dipitso, 2021).

Africanisation and internationalisation are central to the discourse on curriculum decolonisation, as they offer avenues to embed both local and global perspectives into educational practices. Wimpenny et al. (2022) underscore the transformative potential of these approaches in fostering sensitivity, empathy, and a comprehensive understanding of societal needs. The drive for curriculum decolonisation emphasizes the importance of making educational content relevant to the 'social and historical realities of the communities in which universities operate' (Mahabeer, 2018: 3). Thus, this paper focuses on Africanisation, which aims to integrate African perspectives, knowledge systems, and cultural contexts into the curriculum (Mushagasha, 2021). This process is particularly significant for institutions like the University, where embedding local knowledge can empower psychology trainees and enhance their sense of identity and pride while addressing historical imbalances and acknowledging contributions from various fields.

Internationalisation, as outlined by Banda and Zungu (2024: 133), involves the intentional infusion of intercultural, international, and global dimensions into higher education to elevate educational quality. This process seeks to balance global perspectives with local relevance, challenging the historical dominance of Western epistemological frameworks in South African higher education. Wimpenny et al. (2022) argue that internationalisation is crucial for developing a counter-narrative to the persistent hegemony of Western knowledge systems. Complementing this view, Lumadi (2021) emphasizes that such efforts should incorporate diverse global perspectives and epistemologies from formerly colonized regions to promote educational equality.

Given the pervasive concern over curriculum decolonisation across South African higher education institutions, there is a need to integrate diverse learning content that incorporates global perspectives while acknowledging epistemologies from marginalized societies (Shay, 2015). Banda and Zungu (2024) highlight the critical need for curricula that go beyond mere academic performance to embrace human social identity and historical realities. By blending Africanisation and internationalisation, this paper aims to provide psychology trainees with a well-rounded understanding of both local and global contexts. Such an integrated approach not only transcends Western paradigms but also

fosters a more inclusive and diverse educational environment, thereby equipping trainees to engage effectively with a globalized world while remaining attuned to local realities.

METHODS

This study is located within a qualitative exploratory qualitative design with thematic analysis, which seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning from participants social experiences (Pathak, 2017). Within this paradigm, the study is informed by an exploratory qualitative research design chosen for its potential to allow researchers to examine participants' experiences and perspectives, identify underlying trends and patterns that inform future studies (Lösch et al., 2023). An exploratory qualitative design was selected in this study with the aim to investigate a relatively under-explored area, namely how first-year Educational Psychology students understand and experience curriculum decolonisation within a rural comprehensive university context. This design is appropriate when the aim is not to test predetermined hypotheses, but rather to generate in-depth insights into participants' perspectives, meanings, and experiences (Maree & Holtslander, 2021). This allowed the researcher in this study to remain open to emerging ideas from the participants' understanding of curriculum decolonisation rather than imposing pre-existing theoretical assumptions.

Participants

The study involved eight (8) first-year master's students in Educational Psychology enrolled at a rural comprehensive university in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. A purposive sampling as a judgemental, selective and subjective technique (Rai & Thapa, 2015) was used to select participants in this study. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research when participants are deliberately selected because they possess specific characteristics relevant to the research focus. In this case, participants were selected because they:

1. Were first-year students in the same Educational Psychology professional training programme
2. Had direct exposure to the curriculum under study
3. Were able to reflect on their early experiences of curriculum decolonisation within training

The use of a small sample size is consistent with qualitative research principles, where depth of understanding is prioritised over generalisability (Boddy, 2016). The aim was to obtain rich, detailed accounts of participants' experiences rather than statistical representation. Each participant's biographical details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Participants' Bio-graphical Information

PARTICIPANT	PSEUDONYM	GENDER	RACE	AGE	HIGHEST QUALIFICATION
Participant 1	P1	Female	White	30	PGCE - Psychology
Participant 2	P2	Female	Indian	28	B.A, (HONS) - Psychology
Participant 3	P3	Female	African	32	M.Sc. - Psychology
Participant 4	P4	Female	African	30	HONOURS/PGCE
Participant 5	P5	Female	African	55	B.ED. (HONS) – School Guidance and Counselling
Participant 6	P6	Male	African	32	B. PSYCH
Participant 7	P7	Female	African	45	B.A. (HONS) - Psychology
Participant 8	P8	Male	African	41	B.Sc. (Honours) – Psychology)

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. The use of two complementary methods was intended to enhance depth and richness of data through methodological triangulation.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used because they allow flexibility while still maintaining focus on the research objectives (Karatsareas, 2022). This method enabled the researcher to probe participants' responses, clarify meanings, and explore emerging issues in greater depth. This interviews were particularly useful in this exploratory qualitative study because they enabled the researchers to generate detailed, interactive data that reflect participants' experiences and interpretations of curriculum decolonisation.

Open-ended questionnaires

In addition to interviews, participants completed an open-ended questionnaire consisting of guided questions aligned with the research objectives. This method allowed participants time for reflection and the opportunity to articulate their views in writing without time pressure (Züll, 2016). It also ensured consistency across participants' responses. The combination of interviews and questionnaires strengthened the study by capturing both spontaneous verbal accounts and reflective written responses, thereby providing a more comprehensive dataset.

Data Collection Procedures

The collection of data was conducted following ethically guided, and sequential process designed to ensure depth, credibility, and richness of the data (Almusaed et al., 2025). Semi-structured interviews were conducted first, followed immediately by an open-ended questionnaire to enable both verbal exploration and written reflection of

participants' experiences. Each interview session lasted approximately 20–25 minutes and participants' in-depth insights were achieved through the use of carefully designed probing questions that encouraged elaboration, clarification, and reflection. For example, when participants provided brief responses, follow-up prompts such as *"Can you explain what you mean by Africanisation and Decolonisation, "Can you give an example from your experience?"*, and *"How did that situation make you feel or influence your understanding about the decolonisation of the curriculum?"* were used to elicit richer and more detailed accounts. This iterative questioning allowed participants to expand on initial responses without requiring multiple interview sessions.

The subsequent open-ended questionnaire served a complementary function by allowing participants additional time for reflection, particularly on aspects they may not have fully articulated during the interview. The sequential use of interviews and questionnaires strengthened data depth through triangulation (Schlunegger et al., 2024), enabling clarification, confirmation, and expansion of emerging insights across both verbal and written forms. All data collection sessions were conducted in a quiet, private, and supportive environment to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and securely stored, ensuring data integrity and allowing for accurate transcription and analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

Following data collection, the study employed a systematic thematic analysis approach guided by Lochmiller's (2021) framework for analysing qualitative data. Thematic analysis was selected as it provides a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns of meaning across participants' narratives. Lochmiller (2021), drawing on Braun and Clarke (2006), conceptualises thematic analysis as a three-phase process, namely: (i) setup, (ii) analysis, and (iii) interpretation. While Braun and Clarke (2006) outline a more detailed six-step procedure (including familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report), Lochmiller's (2021) framework consolidates these steps into broader analytical phases. This allows for a more streamlined yet interpretively rich engagement with qualitative data.

1. At first, the setup phase involved organising and preparing the data for analysis. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure immersion in the data and familiarity with participants' accounts.
2. Secondly, the analysis phase involved systematic coding of the data. Meaningful units of text were identified and assigned initial codes (McMillan, 2024). These codes were then examined for patterns and grouped into broader categories that reflected recurring ideas across participants' responses. Through an iterative process of comparison and refinement, preliminary themes were developed.
3. Then followed the interpretation phase which focuses on refining and defining the final themes. At this stage, themes were reviewed in relation to the coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure coherence and consistency.
4. The researcher then engaged in the exploratory analysis, moving beyond description to develop meaning and insight into how participants understand and

experience Africanisation within their training as educational psychologists. This thematic analysis approach was appropriate for the study as it enabled both systematic organisation of data and an interpretive engagement with participants' perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Researchers are cognisant of the rights of participants and as psychologists and psychologists in training are bound by the ethics of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) as well as the University's Ethics Committee's Policies and Procedures. Ethical considerations guiding the study are discussed in detail with all Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) protocol followed in terms of ethical guidelines. Permission to conduct research was provided via the Head of Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, where the educational psychology masters professional training programme is housed.

Participants also had to provide permission, via the signed consent form, expressing their preparedness to participate in the research study. Students were provided with a detailed consent form and one of the researchers conducted a briefing session, which provided participants with reasonable information on the background of the study. Participants were all post-graduate students with a deep understanding of research integrity but were still made aware that participation was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point in time from the study. There were nine (9) students registered in the programme, eight (8) consented to participate in the research project and none withdrew.

Participants were guaranteed privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. No personal data (e.g., name of the participant or other identifying details) were used. The researchers used pseudonyms to represent each participant for example: Participant One was named "P1", etc. Pseudonyms allowed for confidentiality and those who are not involved in the study will not have access to the data collected. The researchers also ensured that the data collated will be stored safely. The questionnaire did not raise any emotional content for participants so debriefing was not necessary.

RESULTS

The findings were developed through thematic analysis of the questionnaires and interview data. During the coding process, recurring ideas, meanings, and patterns were identified across participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These patterns were then clustered into central themes that captured how first-year training educational psychology students perceive the decolonisation of the curriculum. The theme was refined through repeated comparison of codes and participant narratives to ensure consistency and depth of interpretation. This process produced the following overarching three themes: First-year training educational psychologists' understanding of Africanisation, First-year training educational psychologists' understanding of Decolonisation, and Perspective of first-year training educational psychologists on decolonisation of the curriculum.

First-year training educational psychologists understanding of Africanisation

The participants conceptualise Africanisation as a multidimensional construct shaped through the interaction between individual meaning-making capacities, socio-cultural contexts, and exposure to knowledge systems. Their understanding indicates an emerging “capacity formations” (ways of thinking and interpreting Africanisation) that are continuously shaped by contextual forces such as history, education, culture, and socio-political realities. Participants’ understanding of Africanisation reveal the following three interrelated subthemes: Africanisation as Fluid, Inclusive, and Contextually Situated Identity, Africanisation as Decolonial Reclamation and Value Reorientation and Africanisation and South African Identity as Belonging, Ubuntu, and Emotional Attachment.

Africanisation as Fluid, Inclusive, and Contextually Situated Identity

Participants demonstrated an understanding of Africanisation as a dynamic and non-essentialist identity, shaped by cultural plurality and experience across the continent. This is evident in P1’s articulation:

“I associate with the diversity that makes Africanism unique ... acknowledging our shared heritage while respecting the individuality of each African nation”

Similarly, P3 reflects cultural pride and connection:

“I am proud of the rich and diverse cultures that exist across the continent ... I am proud to be part of Africa’s natural beauty”

P5 adds a critical dimension by distinguishing African cultural authenticity from imposed influences:

“It means recognising, respecting and treating with dignity the diverse African cultural groups ... not those that were imposed or enforced by any Eurocentric nations.”

Participants’ understanding of Africanisation demonstrates an ability to hold unity and diversity simultaneously, indicating cognitive flexibility in how African identity is constructed. Their responses show that Africanisation is understood as a dynamic and contextually embedded identity system. This understanding emerges through the interaction between contextual factors such as history, culture, and education, and the development of exploratory capacity, resulting in more nuanced and layered constructions of African identity.

Africanisation as Decolonial Reclamation and Value Reorientation

Participants also framed Africanisation as a transformative and decolonial process, aimed at restoring African epistemologies, values, and ways of being. Their responses reflect the contextual influence of colonial history and educational discourse, which shapes how students develop critical exploratory capacities regarding knowledge legitimacy.

P2 emphasises contextual embedding of African values and creating awareness of Africanisation as context-sensitive rather than abstract:

“Creating a space which draws on the importance of African beliefs, cultures and norms as it is relevant within our society.”

P7 extends this into institutional and educational systems by suggesting an understanding of Africanisation as systemic transformation, not individual preference:

“Africanisation refers to the promotion and incorporation of African values, cultures, and perspectives into various aspects of society, such as education and institutions.”

P6 introduces Ubuntu as a guiding epistemic framework which reflects internalisation where Africanisation becomes an ethical orientation rooted in relationally.

“Taking pride in African culture, i.e., Ubuntu (humanity).”

P5 and P8 explicitly highlight resistance to Eurocentric dominance:

P5: “It is the acknowledgement of African values ... not those imposed by Eurocentric nations.”

P8: “Allowing African people to be free to be themselves without being forced to embrace Eurocentric ways.”

The findings indicate that Africanisation is understood as both a process of reclamation and resistance, through which students develop a critical awareness of existing knowledge hierarchies. Participants’ responses demonstrate how historical and cultural contexts, particularly the legacy of colonialism, interact with their emerging critical exploratory capacities. This interaction contributes to the development of decolonial awareness. Overall, the findings reflect an increasing recognition of the structural and ideological forces that shape knowledge systems and influence how Africanisation is understood.

Africanisation and South African Identity as Belonging, Ubuntu, and Emotional Attachment.

The findings show how Africanisation is extended into understandings of South African identity, which is largely expressed through emotional, moral, and relational dimensions.

P1 expresses patriotic attachment which reflects identity rooted in emotional belonging and national pride:

“Being ‘Proudly South African’ means that I have a sense of patriotism and that I have a love for my country”

P6 connects identity to Ubuntu:

“A giving nation that believes in the spirit of Ubuntu”

Similarly, P8 emphasises self-identity and cultural rootedness:

“I love my race, culture, South African way of life and my language. I am proud of Ubuntu bami.”

These responses suggest that South African identity is constructed through relational ethics and cultural affirmation, not only civic belonging. According to these findings, South African identity is therefore not uniform but shaped by emotional attachment, cultural values, and socio-political disillusionment.

First-year training educational psychologists understanding of Decolonisation

The findings indicate the participants varied understanding of decolonisation. Their responses range from historical and structural interpretations to cultural, epistemological, and social justice-oriented perspectives. Decolonisation is primarily understood as a process of transformation that seeks to undo colonial legacies while restoring African identity, agency, and inclusion within education and society. A dominant interpretation frames decolonisation as the dismantling of colonial systems and the restoration of autonomy following historical oppression. This is evident in the below excerpts:

P1: ...Process of gaining independence as a country that was formerly colonised. Decolonisation aims at regaining a sense of sovereignty, self-determination, and cultural identity. It involves the

dismantling of colonial systems and institutions and the pursuit of social, political, and economic autonomy.

P6: Yes! Decolonization or decolonisation is the undoing of colonialism

The participants' definition of decolonisation reinforces a simplified structural interpretation by focusing on reversal rather than detailing the mechanisms or implications of decolonisation. This suggests conceptual decolonisation awareness in South African context. However, some participants emphasised decolonisation as a process of challenging Eurocentric dominance and promoting inclusivity within knowledge systems. P7 explains:

"Decolonization is the process of challenging and changing colonial influences, narratives, and structures, and promoting a more inclusive and diverse perspective."

Similarly, P8 situates decolonisation within African epistemic reclamation:

"It means embracing and recognising African people as the people of origin and allowing them to be themselves and not subjecting them to the Western or Eurocentric ways."

Participants' understanding reflects a decolonial epistemic stance, emphasising identity affirmation and resistance to Eurocentrism. The focus on "allowing them to be themselves" indicates an understanding of decolonisation as liberation from imposed cultural and intellectual frameworks.

Another participant, P4 and P5 clearly articulate decolonisation as cultural, psychological, and economic liberation, particularly for indigenous peoples.

P4: "...give indigenous people 'cultural, psychological, and economic freedom' so they can exercise their right to self-determination over their lands, cultures, and political and economic systems."

P5: "...cultural, psychological and economic freedom for indigenous people with the goal of achieving indigenous sovereignty ... decolonisation means claiming back our originality by valuing our customs, traditions, religions, philosophies and our basic knowledge including our traditional healing, spirit of sharing and caring, believing in ourselves as more capable individuals as thinkers."

These responses demonstrate a holistic and deeply decolonial understanding, extending beyond education into identity, wellbeing, spirituality, and knowledge systems. P5 in particular introduces an affective and existential dimension, framing decolonisation as reclaiming originality and self-belief. This reflects an understanding of decolonisation as both external (systems and institutions) and internal (identity and consciousness).

A further perspective highlights decolonisation as educational fairness and inclusion.

P3 states:

"making education fair for all people regardless of their background or identity. It is about recognizing that the current system is not working for everyone and working on changing it in a way that is inclusive is essential."

This response reflects a social justice-oriented interpretation, focusing on equity and responsiveness in education. While it acknowledges systemic inadequacies, it frames decolonisation primarily in terms of inclusion and fairness rather than structural epistemic change.

The findings reveal a spectrum of "decolonisation" understandings among the participants, ranging from simplistic notions of removal or change, to more complex conceptualisations involving epistemic justice, cultural reclamation, and systemic transformation. While most participants recognise decolonisation as a form of change

linked to colonial histories, fewer demonstrate a fully articulated understanding of its implications for knowledge production and educational practice. This variation suggests that decolonisation remains a developing conceptual framework within their training context, shaped by differing levels of exposure and theoretical engagement.

Perspective of first-year training educational psychologists on decolonisation of the curriculum

Consistent with participants' earlier understandings of Africanisation and decolonisation as interconnected but evolving concepts, participants emphasised that curriculum transformation cannot be achieved rapidly or in isolation. Instead, they viewed it as a slow and demanding process shaped by historical continuities of colonial influence within education systems. This is reflected in participants' recognition that decolonisation is an ongoing and intentional process aimed at addressing entrenched colonial legacies. As one participant explained:

"...The decolonization of the curriculum in South African universities, particularly in programs like Educational Psychology, is a crucial and ongoing process. It aims to address historical biases, colonial legacies, and promote a more inclusive and diverse approach to education"
(P7).

The Participants further suggested that the persistence of colonial structures in curriculum content and pedagogical approaches indicates that decolonisation is not a single event but an extended process requiring sustained effort. This is evident in P6's reflection that "equipping ourselves with African ways of living and behaving would be beneficial for us," which demonstrates an understanding of curriculum change as gradual preparation for contextually relevant practice.

Similarly, P8 emphasised:

"creating more assessment tools that are standardised for South African people" and prioritising "psychological services that neglected rural and poor communities can present a meaningful decolonisation"

Participants' responses highlighted that the programme must remain flexible in order to reflect the diverse demographic realities of the continent and serve all beneficiaries effectively. This reinforces the view that decolonisation is an adaptive and long-term process, requiring continuous institutional responsiveness rather than immediate reform. They indicated that meaningful transformation requires curricular flexibility that is responsive to the diverse sociocultural realities of South Africa and the broader African continent.

One participant stated:

P1: "Educational Psychologists operating in the South African context must be attuned to the unique and diverse requirements of the local population. South Africa's distinct sociocultural landscape varies considerably from Western societies. To ensure equitable and effective practices, it is essential to have flexible curricular and tailor our approaches to South African children, adolescents, and young adults."

This indicates that decolonisation is understood as the adaptation of professional knowledge to local realities, particularly in training contexts. Participants also expressed differing views regarding the extent to which decolonisation has been achieved within the

programme. While some acknowledged the inclusion of African perspectives, they argued that the curriculum remains largely rooted in Eurocentric frameworks.

One participant explained:

P2: "I'm not aware of any changes in my curriculum which has removed parts of colonialism ... They have added an African approach/perspective to it, but most of the curriculum, on paper, is still quite Eurocentric. This is helpful for cases where a problem transcends borders, but other cases require knowledge that can't be found in a Eurocentric curriculum."

Similarly, participants emphasised the need for stronger integration of African Psychology and indigenous knowledge systems. This was linked to the relevance of counselling approaches, assessment practices, and access to services across diverse contexts.

P3: "There is a need to incorporate African Psychology into the curriculum, including indigenous and traditional forms of counselling and healing. There is also a need to ensure that the psychology program is relevant and accessible to students from a range of backgrounds and experiences including those who come from rural areas ... To decolonize the psychology program at the University ..., I would suggest that the current curriculum include more courses on African and indigenous psychology."

P6: "It will be best to introduce African psychology as we will be working with African clients. It will be best to decolonize as our next generation should take pride on being Africans."

The participants' responses reveal that curriculum decolonisation is not only about content inclusion but also about ensuring cultural relevance and professional preparedness for African contexts. They further emphasised that decolonised curriculum should incorporate indigenous knowledge systems that are often excluded from mainstream psychological discourse. This is evident in P5 response:

P5: "In the programme that I am currently enrolled in, decolonizing education will help in understanding the African child in totality in terms of their cultural backgrounds, customs and what is most applicable to them. The concepts like ukuthwasa (Sangoma's) will not be viewed as psychotic tendencies but will be understood in their true context. The healing process will be designed to understand and address African context. The psychometric test material itself will be administered taking into consideration the contextual factors, language and backgrounds of the African child. When curriculum has been decolonised, it will be tailored to address the needs of the African child rather than being tested and diagnosed based on European designed tools which are culturally not fair to the African child."

Despite these calls for curriculum transformation, some participants acknowledged structural constraints that limit the extent of curriculum change, suggesting that decolonisation may be gradual rather than absolute.

P2: "It's impossible to completely decolonize the curriculum since traces of it will always remain. From what I understand, extreme decolonialization isn't necessary. Instead, it would be more effective to remove outdated parts that no longer serve our current South African syllabus, while retaining the parts that have proven to be helpful in transcending Eurocentrism. The preference for an evolutionary approach over a revolutionary one (in improving the curriculum) is grounded in the belief that gradual, systematic change tends to offer more practical and sustainable solutions."

Some participants also viewed existing curriculum practices as partially aligned with decolonial aims, particularly where African perspectives are already integrated into teaching. However, they acknowledged that certain foundational elements remain unchanged.

P1: "I believe that the University ... has made considerable efforts to align the curriculum and programme that I am currently pursuing with the South African context already. African viewpoints are consistently integrated and valued. Emphasis is consistently placed on the importance of a thorough appreciation of our diverse society, and the Professors, Doctors and Lecturers are dedicated to imparting African knowledge to students. Some aspects, like

standardised and normed measures cannot be altered, but the content of the course is specific to the South African context. I am therefore of opinion that the curriculum is already decolonised.”

Beyond curriculum content, participants linked decolonisation to identity formation, pedagogical inclusivity, and the development of culturally grounded professional practice. They emphasised that decolonised education should support students in shaping their identities within African contexts and communities. This is evident in the following quotes:

P4: “Helping students form their identity rather than imposing an identity on them; valuing cultural heritage and place-based knowledge; focusing on the positive, such as resilience and determination, rather than a deficit approach; educating the whole person, not just the intellect. Changing pedagogies to be more inclusive, for example through open-ended multilingual and multicultural practices; revising curriculum to include historically excluded stories.”

P5: “Decolonizing curriculum is a means of empowering students to reflect and form identities within the African wider communities thereby integrating the theories and philosophies that are indigenous and that apply mostly to their communities with the international knowledge and skills.”

In addition, participants stressed the importance of aligning training programmes with societal needs and addressing systemic barriers affecting marginalised communities as a form of a true decolonised curricular.

P5: “The university has to encapsulate societal values that benefits local communities. The programme that I am enrolled with can do this by addressing societal barriers, systemic barriers as well as environmental challenges that affects the rural communities so as to build resilient communities and well-grounded children.”

P7: “To envisage decolonialism at the University ...in my program, there should be a deliberate effort to include African perspectives, voices, and scholars in the curriculum. It should also involve critical reflection on existing biases and stereotypes and fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.”

One of the participants identified institutional culture as an important dimension of decolonial practice, particularly in relation to values such as Ubuntu best to reflect a decolonised curriculum.

P8: “I believe the University ... has already done a lot with investing on many African professionals who are highly esteemed and competent. The University also embraces the principle of Ubuntu more than many Universities I have been to.”

The findings demonstrate that participants conceptualise decolonisation as a gradual, multi-dimensional, and contested process involving curriculum content, pedagogical approaches, institutional culture, and identity formation. While some perceive meaningful progress, others highlight persistent Eurocentric dominance, reinforcing decolonisation as an ongoing and negotiated transformation.

DISCUSSION

The research study aimed to gain insight into the perceptions of first-year students at a rural comprehensive university training on a masters’ educational psychology programme, to determine the nuanced understandings of decolonisation and Africanisation among the students in the educational psychology programme, particularly focusing on their capacity to differentiate these constructs within the context of curriculum reform. This is crucial given that curriculum decolonisation in higher education frequently encounters challenges stemming from misinformed perceptions among academics and institutions regarding its fundamental principles and implementation (Mohammed, 2024;

Phiri et al., 2023). The study focused on students' differentiation between Africanisation and Decolonisation of the curriculum of the programme that they are enrolled in.

The findings of the study indicated that for successful decolonisation it is essential to include Africanisation in the curriculum of psychology programmes, and that there is a need to move away from the Western approach of curriculum development and pedagogy, so as to move away from the injustices of the Westernised University in Africa (Masenya, 2021; Mazodze et al., 2021). Decolonisation is an imperative within higher education, yet many institutions struggle to formulate a coherent response (Shaik & Kahn, 2021). It is also vital to engage with the question of Africanism, to determine the topics, pedagogy and epistemological and ontological foundations on which the discipline is grounded (Baloyi, 2020, Nwoye, 2015). When preparing graduates for multicultural work contexts, collaboration between university educational psychology training programmes and the world of work can enhance the decolonisation of psychology training in South Africa (Nibafu et al., 2021). A central tenet of this inquiry is the identification of pedagogical approaches that can effectively incorporate Africanisation, including African Psychology, to counter the pervasive Eurocentric paradigms still dominating many curricula (Makhanya, 2024). This critical reflection is essential for enabling students to question the presumed objectivity and universality of established psychological knowledge, which often masks its Euro-American-centric biases (Mohammed et al., 2025; Kontopodis & Jackowska, 2019).

The study further revealed that students enrolled in the programme are able to distinguish adequately between Africanisation and Decolonisation with students discussing their heritage as well as integrating of knowledge systems and cultural values into teaching and learning systems. Students felt that Africanisation was a holistic concept that allowed for a diversity of "being". As South African's, students on the programme also aligned Africanisation closely with being South African and were proud of their South African heritage expressing that this also afforded them a unique heritage of resilience and "ubuntu". Just as "ubuntu" allowed for people to embrace each other's humanity freely Africanisation allowed one to be able to embrace their individual heritage freely (Walt & Oosthuizen, 2021). The findings of the study suggest a student-centered approach. The decolonisation of the curriculum also has an impact on how students relate not just to the content taught, but to one another as well, where students emphasised that decolonisation can allow for greater intercultural communication, permitting an exchange of experiences and meanings (Laakso & Adu, 2023).

Students also mentioned opposition to Eurocentric value systems which have long dominated the South Africa education content and pedagogy. Most students noted a move toward decolonialism of the curriculum in the masters' educational psychology training programme, with some indigenous knowledge systems and African Psychology having a strong impact on their understanding of the needs of learners that they were required to work with in the training programme. It was noted that there were gaps that required attention. Students questioned whether it was the nature of the curriculum that did not allow for a complete overhaul since the curriculum for psychology was largely European

and American by design (Adhikari, 2023). Practical implications for curriculum development involve a shift from Eurocentric, knowledge-based systems toward contextually relevant, Afrocentric, and inclusive pedagogical approaches. These processes are not merely about replacing content, but about transforming the entire educational framework, from knowledge production to assessment methods in order to prioritize African realities, languages, and philosophies. Whilst the curriculum of the educational psychology training programme was designed with international standards in mind, some students called for further addition of the participants experiences of the African student as well as more African psychologists being included in the curriculum.

Various recommendations are suggested to ensure the decolonialization of future educational psychology training programmes at higher education institutions in South Africa. The researchers propose that in order to accurately reflect decolonialism in South African educational psychology first-year training programmes, higher education institutions can consider a diverse student population to ensure a wider range of interactions between students on the programme to ensure a truer reflection of the South African demographic so that the learning community can learn from each other; the higher education institutions can also consider a more diverse teaching population to ensure a wider range of interactions between students and teaching staff. Visiting lecturers can also support the decolonialism of the curriculum, especially aspects that are difficult to include on a permanent basis (for example, a topic mentioned by one student: “ukuthwasa (Sangoma’s)”), cross-collaboration with other higher education institutions across the country or continent can also boost decolonialism of the curriculum and increase students understanding of African psychological concepts. Should current programmes not meet necessary standards of decolonialism specialists in the field may be co-opted to support Departments of Educational Psychology to support members of staff who require directionality with re-curriculation.

The educational psychology training programme curriculum has continuously for decades, established, through its curriculum, an ethnocentric viewpoint (Phiri et al., 2023). Decolonising educational psychology training programme curriculum and including the contributions of Black psychology scholars as well as the voices of Black students, is necessary for the creation of a more inclusive teaching and learning environment for African students (Phiri et al., 2023). Decolonisation is not just embracing indigenous psychologies and integrating traditional healing practices, but rather it involves the critical examination of Eurocentric knowledge approaches within pedagogical practices, to ensure that educational psychology training programmes provide a culturally sensitive approach to mental health care (Zembylas, 2018; Akinmolayan et al., 2024). The research further explores how students perceive the integration of indigenous knowledge systems and cultural values into teaching and learning, distinguishing between superficial adjustments and profound epistemic shifts necessary for authentic decolonisation (Joosub, 2021; Kiguwa & Segalo, 2018). If South African higher education institutions hope to successfully decolonise educational psychology training programmes then the researchers suggest future research in the area. It may be necessary to determine how students in

educational psychology training programmes at other higher education institutions conceptualise decolonialism, how staff at all higher education institutions that offer the educational psychology training programme perceive decolonialism and a rural-urban comparative study can be considered.

CONCLUSION

The following limitations to the study and suggestions for improvement for future research need to be considered: the study was conducted at only one institution (rural comprehensive) and hence may only be generalizable to other similar institutions with similar features. Future research needs to consider comparing programmes at more than one institution and across different types of institutions. Another limitation was the sensitivity of the research topic and the researchers were cognisant that participants may be hesitant to disclose their personal experiences within the programme to their lecturers. The researchers made concerted efforts to discuss the use of pseudonyms, confidentiality and privacy issues with participants so that they could participate freely, but due to the small number of participants it was very difficult to maintain complete anonymity. The final limitation was the number of participants which may have had an impact on the findings. A larger sample could have provided more detailed data.

To decolonise the educational psychology training programme curriculum, universities need to integrate cultural, historical, postcolonial, and also feminist perspectives while reflecting on the histories and epistemologies of classic psychological theories. The decolonisation of the curriculum can be implemented through various strategies that include the use of examples from South African history to highlight social justice for example. This should be addressed in teaching, learning, research, community engagement, and support services within institutions. By creating a supportive environment for students, through open dialogue and respect for diverse views, they will be able to confidently engage on debates regarding Africanisation and Decolonialism. Without decolonising the primarily Eurocentric curriculum, accomplishing justice for the colonised is going to be difficult, so the educational psychology curriculum needs to also evolve, shift and change with the times to suit the needs of its' users because of the awareness around diversification.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DECLARATION OF THE USE OF AI

Authors did not use Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools preparation or writing of the manuscript. Authors accept full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript content.

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