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Decolonising from below: Africanisation, student voice, and epistemic justice in South African technical and vocational education and training

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Amid intensifying calls to decolonise education in South Africa, this article advances a theoretically grounded model of 'decolonising from below' – an approach that foregrounds student voice as both a site and a method of epistemic justice in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Drawing on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and African decolonial thought, the study conceptualises Africanisation as the epistemic re-centring of African worldviews, languages, and values, and decolonisation as the structural dismantling of colonial hierarchies in knowledge and pedagogy. Using qualitative data from Learning Cycle Groups or dialogical spaces in which 15 isiXhosa-speaking TVET students collectively interrogated curriculum, language, and institutional culture, the article analyses how students theorise transformation from their lived realities. The findings reveal that students positioned as epistemic agents reframe vocational education beyond employability, envisioning it instead as a relational and ethical practice grounded in Ubuntu and collective self-determination.

Contribution: The article contributes a conceptual model of Africanisation from below, which integrates Freirean praxis with African humanist philosophy, offering both a methodological and a theoretical advance for decolonial research in vocational education.

Keywords: TVET; Africanisation; decolonisation; student voice; Freirean pedagogy; Ubuntu; epistemic justice; curriculum transformation; South Africa.

Introduction

Background

Despite national commitments to curriculum transformation, the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector in South Africa remains marginal within the country's decolonial debates. While universities have become key arenas for contestation over knowledge and power, the TVET sector continues to be framed by technocratic discourses of labour-market responsiveness and skills delivery (Allais & Marock 2024; Vally & Motala 2017). These framings reproduce the colonial logic that vocational education serves the working poor rather than the intellectual elite, positioning TVET as both socially peripheral and epistemically subordinate (Majola, Powell & Jordaan 2024; Ngcwangu 2015).

This article intervenes in that silence by proposing a bottom-up, student-led framework of decolonisation that repositions TVET students as co-theorists of transformation. Building on critiques of the depoliticisation and academisation of vocational education (Majola et al. 2025a), the article asks: How can vocational students, historically treated as passive recipients of technical training, become epistemic agents who theorise from their lived experience? How might their critical engagement with curriculum, language, and pedagogy illuminate new pathways for Africanisation from below? To explore these questions, the study draws on data generated through Learning Cycle Groups (LCGs) – participatory, dialogical spaces informed by Freire's (1970) concepts of conscientisation and cultural circles. Fifteen TVET students from the Eastern Cape participated in five iterative sessions conducted primarily in isiXhosa. These dialogues fostered collective inquiry rather than consensus, enabling students to critique the inherited epistemic hierarchies and reimagine education through the lens of local languages, values, and knowledges.

Emerging from these dialogues was not only critique but also praxis, the enactment of reflection and action in pursuit of transformation. Students challenged the symbolic nature of Africanisation policies. They exposed how Eurocentric curricula, linguistic exclusion, and authoritarian

pedagogy continue to alienate working-class learners. However, they also articulated affirmative visions of TVET as a space of dignity, cultural affirmation, and epistemic renewal.

Conceptually, the paper distinguishes between Africanisation with an epistemic grounding in African ways of knowing and decolonisation as a structural project aimed at dismantling the colonial logic embedded in TVET institutions (Levenson & Paret 2023; Sibanda 2021). Freire's pedagogy of dialogue, humanisation, and praxis bridges these frameworks, resonating with the African philosophies of Ubuntu and communal learning (Freire 1998; Majola et al. 2025b). Through this synthesis, the paper makes two key contributions. Firstly, it develops a theoretical model of Africanisation from below, conceptualising student-led theorisation as a legitimate mode of decolonial knowledge production. Secondly, it demonstrates how Freirean pedagogy, often interpreted as universalist, can be indigenised within African epistemologies to reframe vocational education as a site of social and epistemic justice.

Rather than offering a linear argument, the article unfolds as an iterative dialogue among theory, method, and lived experience. The article begins by situating the study within broader debates on Africanisation, decolonisation, and Freirean praxis, establishing the conceptual tensions that frame the inquiry. This theoretical grounding is then introduced into conversation with the participatory design of the LCGs, a methodological innovation that operationalises these ideas in practice. The subsequent analysis traces how students' narratives reveal both the structural constraints of the TVET system and the generative possibilities of reimagining education from below. Building on these insights, the discussion advances a praxis-based model of Africanisation that emerges directly from student critique and imagination, concluding with reflections on what it might mean to reconstitute TVET as a space of dignity, agency, and epistemic justice.

Conceptual framework: Africanisation, decolonisation, and Freirean praxis in Technical and Vocational Education and Training

The transformation of the TVET sector of South Africa requires confronting not only material inequalities but also the epistemological legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Post-apartheid policy reforms have largely focused on expanding access and restructuring institutions, yet have seldom interrogated what knowledge counts, whose knowledge circulates, and who is recognised as a legitimate knower (Ngcwangu 2015; Walker & Loots 2018). This neglect sustains the peripheral status of TVET within decolonial discourse and reinforces the idea that vocational education is apolitical and purely instrumental. Against this backdrop, the intersecting concepts of Africanisation, decolonisation, and Freirean praxis offer a framework for re-centring epistemic justice in vocational education.

Africanisation as epistemic grounding

In this study, Africanisation denotes more than symbolically including African figures or motifs in curriculum design; it implies re-centring of African epistemologies, values, languages, and cosmologies in educational knowledge systems. It seeks to shift vocational education from being a delivery mechanism for Western industrial norms towards a locally grounded, communally accountable pedagogy. Historically, Africanisation in South Africa has been reduced to representational gestures such as renaming buildings, adding African readings, or celebrating 'African culture' in an otherwise Eurocentric curriculum (Sibanda 2021; Vally & Motala 2014, 2017, 2022). Such cosmetic reform reproduces colonial hierarchies of knowledge by assuming that 'the universal' remains Western while 'the local' is supplemental.

Contrastingly, this paper frames Africanisation as a principle of epistemic justice (Fricker 2007) that insists on the validity of African worldviews as sources of theory and critique. Within TVET, this approach requires recognising indigenous, practical, and communal knowledges; craft traditions, oral histories, and local problem-solving as legitimate epistemic foundations. Africanisation, therefore, is not a cultural ornamentation but an ontological repositioning of who produces and legitimises knowledge. It is about grounding vocational education in relational epistemologies that value interdependence, community wellbeing, and Ubuntu-based ethics of care (Majola et al. 2024).

Decolonisation as structural disruption

While Africanisation addresses what knowledge is centred, decolonisation interrogates the power relations that structure knowledge production itself. It entails dismantling the material, institutional, and cognitive hierarchies that perpetuate coloniality (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mbembe 2016). In the TVET sector, coloniality persists through imported occupational standards, monolingual English instruction, and bureaucratic pedagogies that privilege compliance over critical inquiry. These practices reproduce the banking model of education. They train students to conform to external templates rather than to theorise from their lived contexts (Allais & Ngcwangu 2025; Spreen & Vally 2010).

Decolonisation, therefore, involves a structural politics of knowledge. It seeks to transform not only curriculum content but also institutional governance, language policy, and epistemic authority. It calls for translating educational democracy into epistemic democracy, in which students, lecturers, and communities collectively define what counts as valuable knowledge. Thus, decolonisation moves beyond the epistemic affirmation of Africanisation to confront the systems of power that determine who speaks and who is heard.

Intersections and tensions: Africanisation and decolonisation

Although Africanisation and decolonisation share a common commitment to epistemic justice, they operate at distinct yet complementary analytic scales. Africanisation functions primarily as a cultural–epistemic project, affirming African ways of knowing, being, and relating, while decolonisation serves as a structural–political project concerned with dismantling the colonial power relations embedded within institutions, governance, and discourse. The productive tension between the two lies in their scope and emphasis: Africanisation without decolonisation risks being reduced to symbolic affirmation, offering cultural representation without structural transformation; conversely, decolonisation without Africanisation risks remaining abstractly critical, detached from the local epistemic traditions that provide decoloniality its substance and legitimacy (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023). This study situates Africanisation from below as the point of intersection between these trajectories, a student-led enactment of decolonial principles grounded in local languages, community knowledge, and lived experience. In this formulation, epistemic justice is realised not through top-down reform but through vernacular theorising, in which students name, analyse, and transform their educational realities in their own terms and tongues.

Freirean praxis: Bridging reflection and action

Building on the intersection between Africanisation and decolonisation, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy provides the methodological and ethical bridge connecting these two projects in practice. Freire's concepts of conscientisation, dialogue, humanisation, and praxis, understood as the unity of reflection and action, challenge the passivity of conventional instruction and affirm learners as subjects of knowledge rather than objects of teaching (Freire 1970; Freire & Shor 1987). His insistence that education is never neutral but always political resonates deeply with the decolonial imperative to transform not only what is taught but also how knowledge is produced, shared, and legitimised.

Freirean praxis aligns closely with the philosophy of Ubuntu, which conceives of personhood as relational and learning as a collective process of becoming (Motala & Vally 2022). Both frameworks reject individualism and instrumentalism. They affirm education as a moral and social practice through which human beings realise their interdependence and agency. The synergy between Freire and Ubuntu thus enables a pedagogy of relationality, a decolonial mode of engagement that reconfigures hierarchical relations between teachers and students into dialogical partnerships of co-creation and shared inquiry. In this sense, praxis becomes both an epistemic and an ethical orientation: to teach is to learn, and to learn is to act towards transformation.

In the context of the TVET sector of South Africa, this synthesis reframes vocational education from a narrow skills-training model into a humanising project of social and epistemic renewal. Freirean praxis calls upon educators and students alike to act as co-theorists who transform education through reflection, dialogue, and collective action (Hyslop-Margison & Dale 2010; Majola et al. 2025b). By embedding praxis within local cultural and linguistic realities, vocational learning becomes a space of critical becoming in which technical knowledge intersects with ethical consciousness and community responsibility.

Together, Africanisation, decolonisation, and Freirean praxis form the theoretical architecture of this study. Africanisation grounds education in local epistemic and moral frameworks; decolonisation interrogates and resists the structural continuities of colonial power; and Freirean praxis provides the methodological means to unite the two through critical, dialogical action. This triadic framework repositions TVET as a contested epistemic space in which students are not merely beneficiaries of reform but also active agents of transformation. The framework underpins the study's analysis of the LCGs as dialogical arenas where students enact epistemic agency, theorise from lived experience, and co-construct decolonial futures.

Grounded in this triadic framework, the methodological approach of the study was intentionally designed to translate theory into practice. If Africanisation demands epistemic grounding in local realities and decolonisation calls for structural disruption, then Freirean praxis provides the means through which both can be enacted in research. The methodological design anchored in dialogical, participatory LCGs sought to create conditions in which students could exercise epistemic agency, theorise from lived experience, and engage in collective reflection on their educational realities. These dialogical encounters were not neutral spaces of data extraction but pedagogical interventions in their own right, embodying the Freirean and Ubuntu-inspired principles of co-learning, reciprocity, and relational accountability. In this way, the research process itself became a site of decolonial practice, aligning methodologically with the broader aim of the study: to explore how Africanisation from below might be imagined, enacted, and theorised through the voices and actions of TVET students.

Methodological approach: Learning cycle groups as decolonial dialogues

This study employed a participatory qualitative methodology grounded in critical pedagogy and decolonial theory, positioning student voice not as supplementary data but as a primary epistemic site for theorising transformation in vocational education. Guided by Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, the research sought to disrupt the conventional hierarchies between researcher and participant, as well as knowledge producer and knowledge receiver (Freire 1970; Hyslop-Margison & Dale 2010). Rather than treating TVET students as informants, the study engaged them as co-theorisers or active contributors in a collaborative inquiry into the meaning and possibility of decolonising vocational education.

Learning cycle groups: Pedagogical and methodological foundations

At the centre of this design were the LCGs or dialogical spaces structured to facilitate critical reflection, relational engagement, and the co-construction of new understandings of TVET. The approach draws on Freire's concept of culture circles, in which participants collectively examine lived realities to identify generative themes and imagine alternatives (Freire 1974; Freire & Horton 1990). However, the LCGs adapted this model for the South African TVET context by foregrounding African epistemologies, local languages, and student-led interpretation.

Unlike conventional focus groups that pursue thematic consensus or saturation, the LCGs embraced dissonance and plurality as hallmarks of critical pedagogy (Majola 2024; Rangana 2023). Each of the five sessions over 3 months followed a reflective cycle: sharing personal experiences, collective problem-posing dialogue, and critical envisioning of alternatives. This cyclical design mirrored Freire's praxis on the unity of reflection and action and enabled students to move from description to theorisation. Thus, the LCGs were not merely data-gathering sites, but also pedagogical interventions. They created spaces of dialogical resistance in which participants could interrogate the colonial logics embedded in everyday educational practices and reimagine their learning as a collective act of liberation.

Participants, context, and researcher positionality

Fifteen students were purposively selected from a public TVET college in the Eastern Cape. All were enrolled in National Certificate (Vocational) programmes and shared isiXhosa as a home language, an intentional design to foster culturally grounded dialogue. Participants reflected linguistic and socio-economic diversity, coming from rural and peri-urban communities. Selection criteria included willingness to self-reflect, engage in sustained dialogue, and collaborate in meaning-making. As researchers positioned within the South African education landscape, we approached the project as insider-participants, academics committed to transformation but also implicated in the institutional hierarchies we sought to critique. Our reflexivity involved a continuous examination of how our professional roles, linguistic fluency, and class positions shaped the dialogical process. Reflexive journals were maintained after each session to document interpretive tensions, emotional responses, and shifts in understanding. This reflexive practice formed part of the data corpus and was revisited during the analysis to ensure accountability to positionality and transparency in interpretation.

Language as epistemic resistance

The choice of isiXhosa as the primary language of dialogue was both a methodological and political intervention. The choice contested the epistemic hierarchy that privileges English as the language of intellectual legitimacy in South African education (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021; Wa Thiong'o 1986). Speaking in their mother tongue enabled participants to articulate complex experiences and metaphors that would be diminished in translation. Language thus became a site of epistemic resistance, affirming that African languages are not mere conduits for content, but vehicles of theory and critique (Salawu 2022; Vally & Motala 2014). Translation into English, necessary for analysis and publication, was approached as an interpretive act, not as a neutral procedure. Translation notes accompanied each transcript, recording contextual meanings, idiomatic nuances, and moments in which English failed to capture affective or cultural significance. This reflexive translation process honoured the integrity of participants' voices while making their epistemic insights communicable within academic discourse (Motala, Senekal & Vally 2023).

Data generation and analytical process

All LCG sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed in isiXhosa, and iteratively translated into English for analysis. Data were analysed by using a reflexive thematic analysis informed by Freirean and decolonial constructs such as conscientisation, epistemic disobedience, and relational pedagogy. Rather than imposing pre-existing categories, the analysis followed an abductive logic, moving iteratively among participants' narratives, field notes, and theoretical lenses (Majola et al. 2025b). Coding emphasised dialogical moments, instances in which participants collectively questioned, reframed, or resisted dominant assumptions. Preliminary themes were returned to participants for validation in follow-up meetings, ensuring interpretive credibility and shared ownership of meaning. Four major themes emerged from this process: (1) curricular alienation and disconnection, (2) critique of employability discourses and calls for social purpose, (3) cultural invisibility and identity erasure, and (4) emergence through dialogue of student epistemic agency. These themes are not presented as universal findings but as situated insights, illustrating how decolonial praxis unfolds in context.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Nelson Mandela University Research Ethics Committee (H21-EDU-PGE-021). In keeping with participatory ethics, the research design prioritised relational accountability over extractive data collection. Participants provided informed consent, received transport support, and co-determined meeting schedules. All discussions were held at community-accessible venues. Ethicality in this study extended beyond compliance to embrace reciprocity and care (Taliep et al. 2023). The dialogical method demanded emotional labour, vulnerability, and shared trust. Our ethical stance, therefore, treated participation as a form of co-liberation, in which researchers and students jointly confronted epistemic injustice. The study did not claim neutrality but was intentionally politically engaged, acknowledging that to decolonise methodologically is to make research itself a space of struggle and renewal.

Learning cycle groups as sites of theory-making

Ultimately, the LCGs became laboratories of theory-making. Students moved from describing exclusion to theorising Africanisation and decolonisation from below, constructing grounded concepts such as education as belonging and learning as community upliftment. Through this process, they enacted Freire's call for those who experience oppression to become the authors of their own liberation (Freire & Shor 1987). Thus, what follows is not a detached ethnographic report but an engaged praxis account, a synthesis of voice, reflection, and conceptual emergence. The findings that follow are presented as contextually rooted acts of theorisation, illustrating how epistemic justice can be realised through the dialogical reimagining of vocational education.

Findings

Technical and vocational education and training students as epistemic agents

The transformation of the TVET sector of South Africa cannot be meaningfully advanced without the insights and agency of those most directly shaped by it, its students. Despite decades of policy rhetoric about learner-centredness and curriculum responsiveness (Allais & Marock 2024; Terblanche & Bitzer 2018), vocational students remain excluded from epistemic participation. Institutional and policy discourse continues to cast them as passive beneficiaries of training, rather than as producers of knowledge (Majola et al. 2024; Walker & Loots 2018). The LCGs inverted this logic. Through five dialogical encounters mainly in isiXhosa, students not only shared experiences but also theorised their learning realities. What follows are four interrelated themes capturing how participants enacted Africanisation from below through critique, imagination, and the collective production of new educational meanings.

Disconnection and dislocation: Curriculum as alienation

Students repeatedly described the curriculum as distant, abstract, and detached from their lived realities. As one participant said:

> '*Kufana nokuba abantu ababhala ezi zinto abazange baye elokishini*. [It's like the people who wrote these materials have never been to the township.]' (Participant LKG, Finance graduate, LCG meeting, 2021)

Another added:

> '*Apha esikolweni sifunda ngezinto ezingasifundisi, ezikude ngobomi bethu, kuthiwa zibalulekile kodwa azithethi nathi*. [At college, we learn things that don't teach us about our own lives. They say they're important, but they don't speak to us.]' (Participant MZ, Office Administration graduate, LCG meeting, 2021)

Such reflections illustrate what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) terms epistemic dislocation when students must inhabit a curriculum that denies their social and linguistic worlds.In Freirean terms, this alienation mirrors the *banking model* of education, in which learners receive decontextualised content without dialogue or recognition.

English, as the imposed medium of instruction, was also experienced as an epistemic gatekeeper.

> '*Xa ndithetha isiXhosa, kubonakala ngathi andinalo ulwazi*. [When I speak isiXhosa, it's like I'm seen as someone without knowledge.]' (Participant NOQ, Primary Health graduate, LCG meeting, 2021)

This resistance against linguistic hierarchy reveals how students connect language with epistemic dignity. Their call for multilingual pedagogy was not a plea for translation but for recognition: a demand that African languages be treated as languages of theory, critique, and creativity. As one remarked:

> '*IsiXhosa asiyongxaki ingxaki kukungakholelwa ukuba singacinga ngaso*. [Our language is not the problem. The problem is the disbelief that we can think through it.]' (Participant TKZ, Office Administration graduate, LCG meeting, 2021)

Here, students perform epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2011), asserting their right to theorise in their own linguistic and cultural idioms.

Beyond employability: Reimagining the purpose of technical and vocational education and training

While students appreciated practical training, they critiqued the instrumental view that TVET exists solely to feed the labour market:

> '*Bath' sifanele silungiselele umsebenzi – but akukho mntu uthetha ngethu, ukuba sifuna ntoni ngokwenene*. [They say we must prepare for jobs – but no one asks about us, what we really want.]' (Participant AXM, Primary Health graduate, LCG meeting, 2021)

Another participant expanded:

> '*Andifuni nje umsebenzi. Ndifuna ukusebenzisa izakhono zam ukunceda abantu ekhaya*. [I don't just want a job. I want to use my skills to help people in my community.]' (Participant BTO, Hospitality graduate, LCG meeting, 2021)

These reflections reframe vocational learning as an ethical project, not just an economic one. Students articulated an alternative vision of TVET grounded in Ubuntu education as collective upliftment, interdependence, and social contribution. In this sense, their dialogues enacted what Freire (1998) called praxis: reflection and action upon the world to transform it. The LCGs thus became spaces where students redefined success in vocational education from employability to emancipatory capability.

Cultural invisibility and the erasure of identity

Many students expressed that their classrooms erase the very identities and knowledges that shape who they are:

> '*Kufuneka ndiyeke isithethe sam emnyango ukuze ndibe ngumfundi olungileyo*. [I must leave my culture at the door to be seen as a good student.]' (Participant SRT, Tourism graduate, LCG meeting, 2021)

> '*Sifundiswa ukuphila kwelinye ihlabathi, hayi kwelethu*. [We are trained to survive in someone else's world, not our own.]' (Participant YCT, Tourism graduate, LCG meeting, 2021)

Such testimonies exemplify hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007), a denial of interpretive frameworks that would allow students to understand themselves within education. However, participants also resisted invisibility by reasserting their identities through storytelling, song, and metaphor. In one LCG, a student remarked:

> '*Xa sithetha ngendlela esiphila ngayo, kubonakala ukuba iTVET yethu kufuneka ibe yindawo yokuphila, hayi indawo yokuphunyelwa*. [When we speak about our way of life, it becomes clear that our TVET should be a place to live, not a place to escape from.]' (Participant YCT, Tourism graduate, LCG meeting, 2021)

This quote encapsulates a move from cultural erasure to cultural affirmation or to education as belonging. Through dialogue, students reframed identity from a private matter into a public epistemic resource, connecting personal histories to broader questions of justice and representation.

Dialogues as sites of epistemic emergence

Perhaps, the most transformative process observed in the LCGs was the shift in students' self-perception from silence to voice, and from object to subject. Initially, many described themselves as quiet in class or not academic. Over time, the dialogical structure of the groups cultivated new forms of confidence and critical articulation:

> '*Eklasini ndiziva ndingumntu ongenantsingiselo, apha ndiziva ndingumntu onokuthetha*. [In class, I feel invisible; here, I feel like someone who can speak.]' (Participant NOQ, Primary Health graduate, LCG meeting, 2021)

> '*Apha sifunda ukucinga, hayi ukufunda nje amagama*. [Here, we learn to think, not just to memorise words.]' (Participant AYA, Tourism graduate, LCG meeting, 2021)

These are not only expressions of empowerment but also acts of theorisation. In articulating their own experiences of marginalisation and hope, students produced situated knowledge about how colonial hierarchies operate in vocational spaces.

Through dialogical encounters, they came to recognise themselves as epistemic agents capable of questioning, naming, and transforming the structures that shape their education. This process embodies Freire's notion of conscientisation: the awakening of critical consciousness through collective reflection and action. The LCGs thus functioned as microcosms of decolonial pedagogy spaces where students enacted what Freire termed 'the right to say their own word' and what Ubuntu calls *ukuba ngumntu ngabanye abantu* [to become human through others].

Across these themes, the LCG dialogues revealed that students are not merely subjects of decolonisation but also authors of it. Through isiXhosa discourse, collective reflection, and critical imagination, participants articulated a bottom-up model of Africanisation: one grounded in community, language, and relational ethics. Their words constitute theory-in-formation: an epistemology of everyday life that redefines vocational education as a humanising, culturally rooted, and dialogically sustained practice. This enactment of Africanisation from below demonstrates that transformation begins not in policy documents but in the vernacular voices of the inhabitants of the system.

Discussion

Reclaiming Africanisation as a transformative framework

The narratives emerging from the LCGs challenge the reduction of Africanisation to representational gestures such as symbolic cultural inclusion or the addition of African figures to Eurocentric curricula. Instead, students' analyses point to a deeper demand: a structural and epistemic transformation of vocational education grounded in dignity, language, and community. Their reflections reframe Africanisation not as policy rhetoric but as a living praxis through which students assert their right to define what counts as knowledge in the TVET sector of South Africa. Far from being passive recipients of training, students demonstrated a capacity for theoretical reflection, repositioning themselves as co-producers of educational meaning. Their critiques expose how the TVET system reproduces colonial hierarchies of worth in which technical knowledge is valued, but cultural and linguistic identities are silenced. What their collective reflections make visible is a struggle for epistemic justice: the restoration of their capacity to think, name, and learn from within their own worlds.

Re-politicising Africanisation: From symbolism to structural praxis

Within policy discourse, Africanisation has too often been diluted into symbolic representation or administrative compliance. In the TVET sector, this dilution manifests as token cultural content within curricula still dominated by Eurocentric epistemologies and English-language dominance. Such gestures stabilise rather than disrupt the colonial hierarchies of knowledge. By contrast, the student insights presented here advance a repoliticised vision of Africanisation aligned with Freire's (1998) conception of praxis. Africanisation, from this standpoint, becomes a collective process of reflection and action that reorients curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture around lived experience and social justice. Rather than supplementing Western frameworks with African content, it requires a reconfiguration of the frameworks themselves: who teaches, what is taught, and in whose language learning occurs. This approach shifts Africanisation from an additive reform to a redistributive politics of knowledge, grounded in participation and cultural accountability. It affirms that decolonisation without Africanisation risks remaining abstract, while Africanisation without structural change risks remaining decorative.

Curriculum, language, and pedagogy as interlocking sites of transformation

The findings reveal three interdependent dimensions through which Africanisation from below must operate.

Curriculum: Students' critiques of curricular irrelevance expose a persistent epistemic gap between vocational learning and local realities. The alignment of the current curriculum with global occupational standards detaches the education from students' material and cultural contexts. A decolonial curriculum must therefore move beyond mere inclusion to embrace curriculum justice, the democratic co-design of content that integrates technical, ethical, and community-based knowledge (Vally & Motala 2017; Walker & Loots 2018).

Language: Language surfaced as both a barrier and a site of possibility. English, as the exclusive medium of instruction, functions as a mechanism of exclusion and epistemic silencing. Repositioning African languages, particularly isiXhosa, as legitimate languages of theory and critique constitutes linguistic Africanisation. This activity is not translation for convenience but the recognition of African languages as epistemic instruments that enable students to name the world in their own words (Freire 1970; Wa Thiong'o 1986). Linguistic justice thus becomes integral to decolonial transformation.

Pedagogy: Pedagogical practice emerged as the decisive arena of change. Students' descriptions of rote learning and authoritarian classrooms highlight how TVET pedagogy often reproduces colonial power relations under the guise of neutrality. A decolonial pedagogy must instead centre dialogue, relationality, and co-intentional learning (Freire & Shor 1987). This objective requires a shift in the lecturer's role from a transmitter of content to a facilitator of critical engagement. Building lecturer capacity for multilingual and culturally responsive teaching is essential to operationalising Africanisation in everyday practice. Together, these dimensions form a triadic structure of transformation of curriculum, language, and pedagogy for realising epistemic justice in vocational education.

Conceptualising Africanisation from below as praxis

Synthesising these insights, this study advances Africanisation from below as a praxis framework for decolonial transformation in vocational education. Grounded in student voice and collective reflection, this framework envisions transformation as an iterative and participatory process that moves from the margins inward. At its core, it is defined by four interrelated principles that together constitute a shift from symbolic inclusion to epistemic renewal. The first principle, epistemic grounding, calls for the centring of African worldviews, languages, and knowledge traditions as legitimate sources of theory and pedagogical design. Rather than merely supplementing Eurocentric curricula with African content, the principle repositions African epistemologies as foundational to educational thought and practice. The second, dialogical humanisation, builds on Freire's notion of education as co-intentional action, fostering pedagogical relationships that treat students as subjects and co-creators of knowledge rather than objects of instruction. The third principle, linguistic justice, recognises the right of learners to conceptual and intellectual expression in African languages, not as an accommodation to diversity but as a condition for epistemic equality. Finally, participatory governance demands that students and communities be integrated as active partners in curriculum and institutional design, ensuring that transformation is responsive to lived realities rather than imposed from above.

Taken together, these principles articulate an inverted epistemology, a movement from below, in which those historically excluded from the production of formal knowledge become the architects of its renewal. This reorientation positions Africanisation not as a policy event but as a continuous ethical and political process: a praxis that transforms the logic of TVET from technocratic efficiency towards humanising justice. It challenges educators, policymakers, and scholars to view vocational education not as a terminal pathway within a hierarchical education system, but as a fertile site of theory-building, cultural affirmation, and social imagination. In this sense, Africanisation from below is not merely an aspirational slogan but also a philosophical and methodological commitment to reconstituting education as a space of collective agency and epistemic dignity.

Towards a decolonial technical and vocational education and training praxis

The implications of this study extend well beyond the South African TVET context. The theorisation of Africanisation from below contributes to global debates on epistemic plurality, knowledge democracy, and postcolonial curriculum transformation. The theory demonstrates that meaningful educational innovation often emerges not from elite policy centres but from the vernacular margins in the everyday reflections of those who learn, labour, and imagine in multiple languages and histories simultaneously. The findings of this study suggest that decolonial transformation must begin where colonial hierarchies are most deeply entrenched: in the everyday spaces of learning, where voice, language, and belonging intersect.

In practical terms, the framework of Africanisation from below calls for a reconfigured TVET through participatory curriculum design that brings together students, lecturers, and communities as co-creators of knowledge. The framework also requires institutional language policies that elevate African languages to full mediums of instruction and research, affirming the capacity of these languages for conceptual thought and theoretical discourse. Furthermore, lecturer development programmes must be grounded in critical pedagogy and Ubuntu ethics, equipping educators to facilitate dialogical, culturally responsive, and humanising learning environments. These interventions,

while contextually specific, hold broader significance for rethinking vocational education globally as a site of justice, identity, and epistemic renewal.

This study argues that transforming the TVET sector of South Africa requires more than curricular reform or symbolic gestures of Africanisation. It calls for a fundamental reorientation of educational knowledge, language, and pedagogy. Drawing on dialogical encounters with TVET students through the LCGs, the research demonstrates that those traditionally excluded from the design of education possess rich theoretical insight into its possibilities for decolonial transformation. When students are recognised not merely as recipients but also as co-theorists, vocational education becomes a space for reimagining justice, belonging, and humanisation.

The central contribution of this paper, therefore, lies in articulating Africanisation from below as a praxis-based framework that situates transformation in the lived experiences, languages, and epistemologies of students. This framework redefines Africanisation as a bottom-up process of epistemic justice rather than a top-down policy directive. It reveals that Africanisation provides the epistemic substance of decolonisation (the grounding of knowledge and identity in African realities) while decolonisation provides its structural horizon: the dismantling of colonial hierarchies that continue to shape educational systems. The dialectic between the two creates the conditions for a decolonial TVET praxis: an education that is both locally grounded and globally conversant, technically proficient yet socially responsive, and always oriented towards fully humanising the learner.

Conclusion

This study has argued that transforming the TVET sector of South Africa demands more than inserting African content or symbolic gestures of inclusion. The change requires a fundamental epistemic and structural reorientation, a move from tokenistic reform to a deeply grounded practice of Africanisation from below. By situating student voice at the centre of analysis, the research illuminates how those most marginalised by existing educational hierarchies possess both the experiential insight and the theoretical capacity to imagine new forms of learning, teaching, and institutional life. The LCGs revealed that when students are recognised as epistemic agents rather than passive recipients, they not only critique existing systems but also actively theorise alternatives grounded in lived experience, cultural identity, and communal aspiration.

Theoretically, this paper contributes to ongoing debates on decolonial transformation by not only distinguishing but also connecting Africanisation and decolonisation as complementary projects. Africanisation, as articulated here, provides the epistemic foundation for decolonisation through the centring of African languages, knowledge systems, and moral frameworks. Decolonisation, in turn, provides the structural critique necessary to dismantle enduring colonial hierarchies of knowledge and institutional power. Bridged through Freirean praxis, the unity of reflection and action, these concepts converge into a transformative pedagogy of justice, dialogue, and humanisation. This triadic framework challenges the persistent technocratic logic of TVET and repositions it as a moral and political project concerned with the making of fully human subjects rather than merely employable workers.

Methodologically, the study advances the LCG model as both a research tool and a decolonial pedagogical intervention. The dialogical use of isiXhosa as a primary language of engagement embodied the principle of linguistic justice, while the participatory design foregrounded relational ethics and collective theorisation. This methodological innovation bridges the gap between Freirean theory and African epistemologies of Ubuntu, offering a concrete model for participatory knowledge production that is contextually resonant and ethically grounded.

Africanisation from below reframes vocational education as a dynamic space of epistemic renewal. It challenges educators and policymakers to reimagine TVET not as a peripheral or remedial tier of the education system but as a critical arena for cultivating democratic participation, cultural affirmation, and collective agency. In this vision, education becomes not a tool of adaptation to inherited structures but a process of reimagining the world from within one's own history, language, and lived reality. The study thus affirms that decolonial transformation begins where the global meets the local through the everyday theorising of students who, in naming their conditions, begin the work of transforming them.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Ezekiel Majola: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. Deidre Geduld: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. Heloise Sathorar: Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data supporting this study were generated through a baseline study and interviews conducted by the authors. No external datasets were used. Due to the sensitive and personal nature of the data collected, they are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher.

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