# Exploring Curriculum Transformation in Higher Education Institutions: A Critical Analysis of Equity and Social Justice Perspectives

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper addresses the imperative of curriculum transformation within higher education in South Africa to confront and mitigate structural inequalities and promote equitable access and outcomes. Drawing upon Fraser's multi-dimensional framework for social justice, the study critically examines the efficacy of curriculum interventions, particularly Education Development initiatives in South Africa. Fraser's framework enables assessing how these interventions address justice dimensions: redistribution, misrecognition, and representation. The analysis reveals that existing interventions predominantly adopt an affirmative rather than transformative approach, primarily focusing on redistributive justice while neglecting misrecognition and representation issues. The study underscores the necessity of embracing a transformative paradigm in curriculum development within South African higher education institutions. A transformative approach necessitates a fundamental reframing of the curriculum, involving reassessing the scale of existing challenges, interrogating underlying assumptions shaping curriculum norms, and re-evaluating the delineation between 'mainstream' and 'other' students. Moreover, it advocates for revisiting the appropriateness of the curriculum for a diverse and pluralistic society. In conclusion, the paper advocates for a comprehensive reframing of the South African higher education curriculum, emphasising the imperative of transformative practices. It proposes recommendations for reformulating the curriculum to address better social justice issues, including embracing inclusivity, challenging prevailing norms, and fostering a curriculum that reflects the diversity and complexities of contemporary society.

**KEYWORDS**

Curriculum transformation; higher education; social justice; structural inequalities; equity access; Fraser's framework.

**INTRODUCTION**

In the landscape of higher education, the quest for equity and social justice remains an enduring challenge (Ajani & Simmonds, 2022). Despite efforts to address structural inequalities, higher education institutions grapple with systemic barriers that hinder equitable access and outcomes (Le Grange, 2023a). This paper explores how curriculum transformation can be potent in confronting and dismantling entrenched injustices within higher education settings. Thus, recognising the pivotal role of curriculum in shaping educational experiences, the study contends that meaningful change must extend beyond superficial adjustments to reframe the educational landscape fundamentally. Drawing upon Fraser's multi-dimensional framework for social justice, this paper critically examines the extent to which existing curriculum interventions align with the imperatives of equity and justice. Furthermore, through a nuanced analysis of a specific case study, namely Education Development in South Africa (Le Grange, 2023b), the paper assesses the efficacy of past interventions in addressing the complex interplay of social, economic, and cultural factors that perpetuate inequality in various spheres of higher education. Thus, by evaluating these interventions against Fraser's framework, the study aims to elucidate the shortcomings of affirmative approaches and advocate for transformative strategies that foster more profound structural change.

The background of this study is rooted in the pressing need for educational equity and social justice within higher education systems globally. In many countries, including South Africa, higher education institutions have historically been sites of exclusion and inequality, perpetuating systemic barriers that limit access and success for marginalised groups (Le Grange, 2023a). Despite efforts to address these disparities through various interventions, persistent inequities undermine the transformative potential of higher education in South Africa (Jansen, 2023). This inequality in higher education has attracted debates among scholars (Ajani, 2019, 2021; Jansen, 2023; Le Grange, 2023), advocating for the reality of social justice in higher education. Within the South African context, the legacy of apartheid has left a profound imprint on the higher education landscape, with historical inequities based on race, class, and geography still evident today. While significant strides have been made since the democratic transition in 1994 to democratise access to higher education, challenges related to curriculum transformation persist. As a foundational component of higher education, the curriculum plays a crucial role in shaping students' educational experiences, identities, and opportunities for social mobility (Council of Higher Education, [CHE], 2015, 2016). Against this backdrop, there is a growing recognition of the need to critically examine the curriculum within higher education institutions through a lens of equity and social justice. Curriculum transformation seeks to challenge dominant narratives, disrupt oppressive structures, and centre the experiences and perspectives of marginalised communities (Fanon, 2008). Thereby recognising, accommodating, and integrating diverse groups in South Africa into knowledge-building and higher education spaces. However, despite these aspirations, the curriculum transformation process remains

complex, multifaceted, and contested, requiring nuanced understandings and approaches to effect meaningful change (Ajani, 2022; Ajani & Simmonds, 2022; Fraser, 2008; Le Grange, 2021).

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic experience has further underscored the urgency of addressing systemic inequities within higher education. The sudden shift to remote learning and digital platforms has exacerbated existing disparities facing students' access to technology, resources, and support services, disproportionately affecting students from marginalised backgrounds. As higher education institutions navigate these unprecedented challenges, there is a renewed imperative to interrogate and reimagine the curriculum in ways that promote inclusivity, accessibility, and social justice in South African higher education (Jansen & Walters, 2022). Thus, in response to these dynamics, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on curriculum transformation in higher education, particularly within the South African context. The author critically examines the intersection of race, power, and curriculum; this research aims to illuminate the underlying structures and ideologies that shape curriculum development, implementation, and outcomes. Hence, an exploration of the experiences, perspectives, and voices of diverse stakeholders provides more equitable and inclusive approaches to curriculum design, delivery, and assessment (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). Ultimately, this study aspires to catalyse critical dialogue, informed action, and transformative change within higher education institutions by situating curriculum transformation within broader discussions of educational equity and social justice. By placing the experiences and needs of marginalised communities in the centre of learning in higher education across South Africa, this research seeks to advance the vision of higher education as a catalyst for social transformation, empowerment, and liberation in this dynamic and globally competitive space

Furthermore, the author contends that a truly transformative approach to curriculum necessitates a comprehensive reframing of existing paradigms. Reframing entails interrogating underlying assumptions, challenging normative structures, and reconceptualising the boundaries between student cohorts (Le Grange, 2023a; Mbembe, 2016; Mill, 2007). Furthermore, by situating the curriculum within the context of a pluralist society, the study seeks to underscore the importance of cultivating inclusive educational environments that reflect and embrace diverse perspectives. Through these insights, the paper sets the stage for a nuanced discussion on the potential pathways toward curriculum transformation and the imperative of advancing social justice within higher education. The author explores various scholarly publications to argue, establish, and advocate for curriculum redesign for equity and justice in South African higher education spaces. Hence, this study is guided by the following key objectives:

**Research objectives**

- To assess the alignment of existing curriculum interventions with the imperatives of equity and social justice.
- To interrogate the complexities and challenges of curriculum transformation.

- To propose transformative strategies for advancing equity and social justice in higher education curriculum

**Preliminary Literature Review**

The literature review for this study delves into the multifaceted dimensions of curriculum transformation within higher education, with a specific focus on the South African context. The review begins by examining the historical legacies of apartheid and their enduring impact on the higher education landscape, highlighting the entrenched inequalities and systemic barriers that continue to shape access, participation, and success for diverse student populations. Studies by scholars such as Mamdani (1996) and Nzimande (2015) offer critical insights into the historical context of higher education in South Africa, tracing the roots of inequity and exclusion within the system. Thus, central to the literature review is an exploration of the theoretical frameworks that inform discussions of curriculum transformation. Critical race theory (CRT) emerges as a prominent lens to analyse race, power, and curriculum intersections within higher education. Scholars such as Ladson-Billings (1998) and Delgado and Stefancic (2017) have advanced CRT as a powerful analytical tool for understanding how racial hierarchies and ideologies permeate educational institutions, shaping curriculum content, pedagogical practices, and student experiences.

Building on the theoretical foundations of CRT, the study examines the principles of curriculum transformation based on Freire's (1970) and Giroux's (1988) arguments, thus emphasising the transformative potential of education in challenging dominant narratives, fostering critical consciousness and promoting social justice. It also considers the conceptual frameworks and models of curriculum transformation proposed by scholars such as Reed and Rudman (2023) and Xu (2024), which emphasise the need to centre marginalised voices, perspectives, and knowledge systems in curriculum development processes. Thereby advocating for the redesign of the higher education curriculum in South Africa to reflect the country's diversity. Furthermore, the author critically engages with empirical studies and case analyses that shed light on the practical dimensions of curriculum transformation initiatives within higher education institutions. Scholars such as Cloete et al. (2016) and Badat (2010) provide valuable insights into the challenges, tensions, and opportunities associated with curriculum reform efforts in South African universities, highlighting issues of resistance, contestation, and implementation gaps. At various times, South African higher education has witnessed crises and protests that called for the decolonisation of higher education to accommodate diverse social groups in the rainbow nation (Jansen & Walters, 2020). Thus, Ajani (2023), Cloete et al. (2016), Jansen (2022), and Le Grange (2023a), in their studies underscore the complexities inherent in curriculum transformation processes and underscore the importance of adopting inclusive, participatory, and contextually relevant approaches.

In addition to examining the macro-level dynamics of curriculum transformation, the literature review also explores the micro-level experiences and perspectives of various stakeholders, including students, faculty, administrators, and community members. Through

qualitative inquiries and narrative analyses, researchers such as Khan et al. (2023); Khandiko et al. (2023) illuminate the lived realities of individuals impacted by curriculum transformation initiatives, uncovering diverse viewpoints, challenges, and aspirations. These studies underscore the importance of involving the voices and agency of marginalised communities in curriculum reform efforts, fostering dialogue, collaboration, and collective action. Conversely, this study synthesises a rich body of scholarship that underscores the imperative of curriculum transformation within higher education, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa. It highlights the interconnectedness of race, power, and knowledge production in shaping curriculum content, pedagogy, and student experiences (Luckett, 2016; Maistry & Le Grange, 2023b). By drawing on theoretical insights, empirical research, and lived experiences, the author comprehensively understands the complexities, tensions, and possibilities inherent in curriculum transformation processes. This study seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations and efforts to advance equity, inclusion, and social justice within higher education institutions through its critical analysis and synthesis of existing literature.

Higher education in the South African context has undergone significant transformations since the end of apartheid in 1994 (Luckett & Naicker, 2016). Mbembe (2016) posits that historically, the higher education system was characterised by racial segregation and inequities, with limited access for Black South Africans to quality education. The post-apartheid era ushered in a new era of democratisation and efforts to address past injustices through policies to expand access and promote equity in higher education. Thus, one of the landmark policies in South African higher education is the Higher Education Act of 1997, which laid the foundation for the restructuring of the sector and the establishment of a more inclusive and equitable system (Harvey et al., 2016; Higgins, 2013; Morreira, 2017). Subsequent policy documents, such as the White Paper on Higher Education of 1997 and the National Plan for Higher Education of 2001, outlined the government's commitment to redressing historical imbalances and promoting social justice through education. Despite these policy efforts, challenges persist in South African higher education. Access to higher education remains unequal, with disparities along racial, socio-economic, and geographical lines. Black South Africans, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, continue to face barriers to entry and completion in higher education institutions (Ajani, 2023; Le Grange, 2023a). While funding and financial aid are critical aspects of higher education in South Africa, the government has introduced various financial assistance schemes, such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Funding shortages and administrative challenges have hindered efforts to ensure equitable access to higher education for all deserving students across South African institutions (Jansen, 2023). The high cost of tuition fees and living expenses further exacerbates financial barriers for marginalised students seeking admission or studying in many higher education institutions across the country.

Furthermore, the quality and relevance of higher education in South Africa have come under scrutiny due to various challenges that have impacted the quality of education (Smith,

2012). Persistent challenges include outdated curricula, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of qualified academic staff. The need to decolonise the curriculum and promote epistemic diversity has emerged as a critical priority in efforts to transform higher education and make it more inclusive and responsive to the needs of diverse student populations (Zipin, 2015). In recent years, student activism and protests have brought attention to transformation, decolonisation, and social justice within South African higher education. The #FeesMustFall movement, which emerged in 2015 and crippled many institutions (Simmonds & Ajani, 2022; Shay et al., 2016), called for the decolonisation of higher education and the abolition of tuition fees. While the movement sparked national debate and led to some policy reforms, challenges persist in addressing the underlying structural inequalities in the higher education system. However, higher education institutions and policymakers have increasingly focused on initiatives promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (Shay, 2017). Efforts to recruit and retain students from underrepresented groups, implement inclusive pedagogical practices, and foster a conducive campus environment for all students have gained momentum in recent years. However, Jansen (2023) asserts that most of these efforts have yet to be effectively implemented but are rather paper-based policies or efforts. Hence, the role of higher education in fostering socio-economic development and addressing pressing societal challenges is another area of focus in the South African context (Morrow, 2009). Studies have reiterated that Higher education institutions are expected to contribute to the country's human capital development, innovation, and research efforts while also addressing pressing issues such as unemployment, poverty, and inequality that linger on in South Africa (Morreira, 2015; Morrow, 2009; Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Njamnoh, 2020; Said, 1993).

In conclusion, while progress has been made in expanding access to higher education in South Africa, significant challenges remain in ensuring the sector's equity, quality, and relevance. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach encompassing policy reforms, institutional transformation, and stakeholder engagement (Smith, 2012; Young, 2001). By prioritising equity, social justice, and inclusive practices, South African higher education institutions can advance the country's development agenda and foster a more equitable and prosperous society.

**Reframing equity and justice through Fraser's multi-dimensional framework in education development: South African perspectives.**

Fraser's multi-dimensional framework for social justice provides a comprehensive lens through which to examine equity and justice in education development, particularly in the context of South Africa. Fraser's framework, developed in her seminal works in 2005 and 2009, posits that justice encompasses three interrelated dimensions: redistribution, recognition, and representation. Applying this framework to South African perspectives on education development offers insights into the complexities of addressing historical injustices and promoting equitable outcomes in the country's education system. South Africa is a diverse country with different multiracial groups that require equality and social justice in its education

system (Higgins, 2013). Similarly, Fraser argues for a system that provides leverage for all, with equal opportunities. Thus, redistribution, the first dimension of justice according to Fraser, focuses on the fair distribution of resources and opportunities to address socio-economic inequalities (Fraser, In the South African context, the legacy of apartheid has left deep-rooted disparities in access to quality education, particularly along racial and socio-economic lines (Fricker, 2007; Hall, 2015). Education development initiatives must prioritise redistributive justice by allocating resources and interventions to historically disadvantaged communities and marginalised groups (Dube et al., 2023; Fraser, 2005, 2009; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016). Recognition, the second dimension of justice, pertains to acknowledging and validating diverse identities, cultures, and histories within society. In South Africa, where the scars of apartheid continue to affect social cohesion and identity, recognition is essential for promoting inclusivity and affirming the dignity of all individuals (Biko, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Boughey, 2010; Maistry & Le Grange, 2023; McCowan, 2007). Education development programmes should incorporate diverse perspectives, languages, and cultural practices into curricula and pedagogical approaches to foster a sense of belonging and respect among students. Representation, the third dimension of justice, concerns the equitable participation and inclusion of marginalised groups in decision-making processes and institutional structures. In the South African education system, representation is crucial for ensuring that the voices and interests of historically excluded communities are heard and valued. Education development efforts should prioritise the representation of diverse stakeholders, including students, parents, educators, and community members, in policy formulation, governance, and programme implementation.

However, applying Fraser's framework to South Africa reveals the limitations and challenges of pursuing justice in education development. South African higher education is complicated and interwoven, which calls for some caution (Jansen, 2021). Le Grange (2022) argues that structural barriers and systemic inequalities persist despite policy commitments to equity and inclusivity, hindering progress towards transformative change. Ajani and Gamede (2021) posit that the legacy of apartheid, coupled with contemporary socio-economic disparities, complicates efforts to achieve meaningful redistribution, recognition, and representation in education. Moreover, the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and other axes of identity further complicates the pursuit of justice in education development (Carnoy et al., 2014; Chatterjee, 2011; Clegg, 2009; Fanon, 2008; Moloi et al., 2023). Intersectional analysis is essential for understanding how multiple forms of oppression and privilege intersect to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities within the education system. Education development initiatives must adopt an intersectional lens to address marginalised communities' diverse needs and vulnerabilities and foster more inclusive and equitable educational environments (Dube, 2020; Fanon, 2008; Jansen & Walters, 2022).

In conclusion, reframing equity and justice in education development requires a nuanced understanding of the historical legacies, structural inequalities, and intersecting identities that shape the South African context (CHE, 2015, 2016). Fraser's multi-dimensional framework offers

a valuable analytical tool for unpacking the complexities of justice in education and guiding transformative interventions. By addressing issues of redistribution, recognition, and representation, education development efforts can contribute to building a more just and equitable society in South Africa, where all individuals have the opportunity to thrive and fulfil their potential.

**Critical Race Theory and Curriculum transformation for equity and justice in higher education**
Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a powerful and relevant theoretical framework for examining curriculum transformation in higher education through the lens of equity and social justice. Firstly, CRT offers a comprehensive understanding of the pervasive and systemic nature of racism and other forms of oppression embedded within societal structures, including educational institutions. By acknowledging the historical and ongoing realities of racism, CRT provides a nuanced framework for analysing how power dynamics and racial hierarchies influence curriculum development, implementation, and outcomes in higher education settings (Shay, 2017). Seemingly, CRT emphasises the intersectionality of race with other social identities such as gender, class, and sexuality. In the context of curriculum transformation, this intersectional approach allows for a more holistic examination of how various forms of oppression intersect and interact to shape students' educational experiences and outcomes (Morrow, 2009). Thus, by recognising the complex interplay of multiple social identities, CRT enables researchers to uncover how curriculum design and delivery may perpetuate or challenge intersecting forms of marginalisation and privilege. Moreover, CRT emphasises the importance of centring the voices and experiences of marginalised communities in educational research and policy-making processes. Through its commitment to storytelling, counter-narratives, and lived experiences, CRT encourages researchers to critically examine whose knowledge and perspectives are privileged and marginalised within the curriculum (Hurst, 2015). This focus on voice and representation aligns with the goals of curriculum transformation aimed at fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments that validate diverse ways of knowing and being for South African students.

Furthermore, CRT provides a critical lens to analyse the role of power and resistance in curriculum transformation efforts. By highlighting how dominant ideologies and institutional structures perpetuate inequalities, CRT encourages researchers to identify points of resistance and the possibility for transformative change within higher education institutions (Le Grange, 2023a). Focusing on resistance and agency is crucial for understanding how educators and students can challenge and disrupt oppressive curriculum practices and advocate for more inclusive and socially just educational policies and practices. In addition, CRT underscores the importance of reflexivity and self-awareness in educational research and practice. By encouraging researchers to critically reflect on their positionalities, biases, and complicity in systems of oppression, CRT promotes a more ethical and accountable approach to curriculum transformation research (Cooper, 2015). This reflexivity enables researchers to engage in more meaningful and authentic dialogue with students, colleagues, and community stakeholders,

fostering collaborative efforts towards educational equity and social justice (Ajani & Simmonds, 2022).

Conversely, Critical Race Theory offers a robust and illuminating theoretical framework for examining curriculum transformation in higher education through a lens of equity and social justice. By centring the experiences of marginalised communities, challenging dominant ideologies, and emphasising reflexivity and resistance, CRT provides valuable insights and tools for researchers, educators, and policymakers to meaningfully engage in efforts to create more inclusive and equitable educational environments. As such, the application of CRT in curriculum transformation research holds significant potential for advancing our understanding of the complex dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression in higher education and catalysing transformative change towards more just and equitable educational practices and policies (CHE, 2016; Cooper, 2015; Fraser, 2004; Jansen & Walters, 2020).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic literature review to explore the landscape of curriculum transformation in higher education, focusing on equity and social justice. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework was employed to guide the review process (Cleggs et al., 2016). A comprehensive search strategy was initially developed to identify relevant literature from academic databases, including EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Keywords such as 'curriculum transformation', 'higher education', 'equity', and 'social justice' were used to search for relevant information. Hence, the search was rigorous to ensure the inclusivity of relevant studies (Sauer & Seuring, 2023). The identified articles were screened following the search process based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. To cover more recent studies on the phenomenon, the researcher searched for articles from 2010 to 2024 that were only publications written in the English language, with a focus also on curriculum transformation within higher education contexts, equity and social justice. Studies that focused on other educational levels or did not directly engage with the themes of curriculum transformation and social justice were excluded. Thus, the researcher conducted the screening process independently to ensure consistency and rigour in selecting studies (Pual et al., 2023). After the initial screening, the selected articles underwent a thorough data extraction process. Relevant information, including author(s), publication year, research aims, methodology, key findings, and implications, was systematically extracted from each article. The extracted data were then analysed to identify common themes, patterns, and insights related to curriculum transformation and social justice in higher education (Hiebi, 2023). Through the systematic review process, some themes were generated through the thematic analysis of the review to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of research in this area and contribute to advancing knowledge and understanding in curriculum studies and higher education research.

In addressing concerns regarding the reliability of the study, rigorous methodological procedures were implemented to ensure the validity and reliability of the systematic literature review. These included adhering to the PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews, employing transparent and replicable search strategies, and critically appraising the quality of included studies to minimise bias and enhance the robustness of the findings (Sauer & Seuring, 2023).

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The researcher explored various related studies from various sources to collect in-depth information for this study. Hence, content analysis led to generations of themes to present findings.

*Education development in South African higher education*

Ajani (2019) argues that South African higher education has undergone significant transformations since the end of apartheid, reflecting broader societal changes and aspirations for inclusive development. The legacy of apartheid, characterised by racial segregation and unequal access to education, continues to shape contemporary challenges and opportunities in the higher education sector. Understanding the dynamics of education development in South African higher education requires a nuanced examination of historical legacies, policy frameworks, and socio-economic realities (Dube & Campbell, 2023). Historically, South African higher education was characterised by racial segregation and limited access for Black students, who were systematically excluded from white-dominated institutions (Luckett, 2016). The advent of democracy in 1994 ushered in a new era of reform, marked by efforts to redress past injustices, expand access, and promote equity in higher education. Initiatives such as establishing historically black universities and implementing affirmative action policies sought to address historical disparities and promote inclusive development (Luckett & Naicker, 2016). However, despite progress in expanding access to higher education, South Africa continues to grapple with persistent challenges related to equity, quality, and relevance (Mbembe, 2016). Structural inequalities, socio-economic disparities, and systemic barriers continue to hinder the full realisation of educational opportunities for marginalised communities (Dwomoh et al., 2023), including Black students, rural populations, and those from low-income backgrounds (Jansen & Walters, 2022). These challenges underscore the need for comprehensive education development strategies that address the root causes of inequality and promote sustainable transformation.

Education development in South African higher education is guided by various policy frameworks and legislative instruments to promote equity, access, and quality (Omodan & Adam, 2022; Maistry & Le Grange, 2023). The National Plan for Higher Education, the White Paper on Higher Education and Training, and the National Development Plan provide strategic direction and priorities for education development initiatives. These frameworks emphasise the importance of addressing historical injustices, promoting social cohesion, and enhancing the relevance and responsiveness of higher education to societal needs. Smith (2012), Shay (2017)

and Morreira (2017) report that in recent years, the discourse on education development in South African higher education has increasingly focused on issues of decolonisation, transformation, and social justice. Calls for curriculum decolonisation, institutional reform, and student activism have highlighted the need to challenge Eurocentric perspectives, decolonise knowledge systems, and promote indigenous epistemologies. Education development initiatives increasingly embrace principles of social justice, inclusivity, and cultural responsiveness to address students' and communities' diverse needs and aspirations.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and underscored the importance of resilience, innovation, and adaptability in higher education (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). The shift to online learning, remote teaching, and digital technologies has posed new challenges and opportunities for education development in South African higher education. Initiatives to bridge the digital divide, enhance digital literacy, and leverage technology for inclusive learning have become critical priorities in the wake of the pandemic (Simmonds & Ajani, 2022).

In conclusion, education development in South African higher education is a complex and multifaceted endeavour that requires a holistic approach to address historical injustices, promote equity, and enhance quality and relevance. By addressing systemic inequalities, embracing principles of social justice, and leveraging innovation and technology, South Africa can advance its aspirations for inclusive and sustainable development in higher education (Le Grange (2023b; Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Shay, 2017). However, realising these goals requires collective action, political will, and sustained investment in transformative education development strategies that empower individuals, transform institutions, and contribute to positive social change.

*Education Development Initiatives in South Africa*

Education development initiatives in South Africa have been central to the country's efforts to redress historical injustices, expand access to quality education, and promote inclusive development (Moremoholo, 2023). These initiatives have evolved in response to changing socio-political landscapes, policy imperatives, and educational priorities, reflecting a dynamic and multifaceted approach to addressing the complex challenges facing the education system ((Smith, 2012). The Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (Department of Education, 2001) represents a seminal policy document that underscored South Africa's commitment to inclusive education. The White Paper emphasised the importance of removing barriers to learning, promoting diversity, and providing support services to learners with special needs within mainstream schools. It laid the foundation for a more inclusive and equitable education system, informed by principles of social justice and human rights (Chimbi & Jita, 2023).

Furthermore, the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education, 2001) provided strategic direction and priorities for education development in South African higher education. The plan emphasised the importance of expanding access, enhancing quality, and

promoting equity in higher education. It called for increased investment in infrastructure, faculty development, and research capacity to support the growth and diversification of the higher education sector.

Also, the National Development Plan (National Planning Commission, 2012) articulated a long-term vision for education development in South Africa, emphasising the importance of education in driving social and economic transformation. The plan identified key priorities, including improving educational outcomes, reducing disparities, and strengthening the education system's capacity to respond to the country's development needs (CHE, 2015). In addition, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act (South African Qualifications Authority, 1995) established SAQA as the national authority responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which is another initiative in education development. The NQF provides a comprehensive framework for the recognition of qualifications, the accreditation of education and training providers, and the development of standards and qualifications relevant to society's needs.

The Skills Development Act (Department of Labour, 1998) and the Skills Development Levies Act (Department of Labour, 1999) established the framework for skills development in South Africa. These acts aimed to address skills shortages, improve productivity (CHE, 2016), and promote lifelong learning by implementing skills development programmes and establishing Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs). Moreover, the introduction of the Further Education and Training Colleges Act (Department of Education, 2006) sought to transform the further education and training sector in South Africa by consolidating and standardising the governance and funding arrangements for public FET colleges. The act aimed to enhance the quality and relevance of vocational education and training, expand access to post-school education, and promote collaboration between colleges and industry stakeholders. Further steps in education development led to the establishment of the Higher Education Act (Department of Education, 1997; Le Grange, 2023a), which provided the legal framework for the governance, funding, and regulation of higher education institutions in South Africa. The act established the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) to oversee quality assurance and promote teaching, research, and community engagement excellence.

The South African Schools Act (Department of Education, 1996) represented a landmark piece of legislation that aimed to democratise and transform the school education system in South Africa. The act established the framework for public schools' governance, funding, and management, emphasising principles of equity, redress, and inclusivity. Also, the Early Childhood Development Policy (Department of Education, 2001) provided the policy framework for developing and implementing early childhood development programmes in South Africa. The policy aimed to improve access to quality early childhood education and care services, promote holistic child development, and support families and communities in providing nurturing and stimulating environments for young children (CHE, 2015). To enhance teacher

education in higher education spaces, the National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development (Department of Education, 2007) outlined the strategic priorities and interventions for improving the quality and effectiveness of teacher education and development in South Africa. The framework emphasised the importance of recruiting, training, and retaining high-quality teachers, promoting professionalisation and continuous development, and ensuring that teachers are adequately prepared to meet the diverse needs of learners in South African schools (Ajani, 2023; CHE, 2016).

*The appropriateness of the curriculum for a diverse and pluralistic society in South African higher education*

In South African higher education, the appropriateness of the curriculum for a diverse and pluralistic society has emerged as a critical concern in the quest for educational equity and social justice (Nyamnjoh, 2020). The country's history of apartheid and segregation has left a legacy of deep social divisions, which are reflected in patterns of access, participation, and achievement in higher education. Hence, the notion of an appropriate curriculum encompasses not only the content of educational programmes but also the pedagogical approaches, assessment methods, and learning outcomes that reflect the diverse needs, experiences, and aspirations of students from different backgrounds. In South Africa, the challenge of designing an appropriate curriculum is compounded by the country's complex history of colonialism, racial discrimination, and cultural marginalisation (Mbembe, 2016). However, the need for an inclusive curriculum that recognises and affirms diverse identities, cultures, and knowledge systems is underscored by the principles of social justice, human rights, and democratic citizenship. A curriculum that reflects the values of inclusivity, diversity, and social cohesion can contribute to the empowerment of historically marginalised groups, promote cross-cultural understanding, and foster a sense of belonging and identity among all students (Ajani & Simmonds, 2022; Jansen & Walters, 2020). The existing curriculum in many South African higher education institutions has been criticised for its Eurocentric bias, which privileges Western knowledge systems and perspectives while marginalising indigenous knowledge, languages, and epistemologies (Fanon, 2008). This Eurocentric bias perpetuates patterns of exclusion and alienation among students from non-Western backgrounds and reinforces existing power dynamics within the education system.

Efforts to reform the South African higher education curriculum have sought to address these issues by promoting a more inclusive, diverse, and decolonised approach to teaching and learning. This includes initiatives to integrate indigenous knowledge systems, promote multilingualism, and incorporate perspectives from diverse cultural, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds into the curriculum (Said, 1993). Scholars posit that despite these efforts, challenges remain in translating principles of inclusivity and diversity into tangible changes in the curriculum (Morrow, 2009; Shay, 2017; Zipin, 2015). Resistance from entrenched power structures, lack of resources, and institutional inertia pose significant obstacles to curriculum transformation efforts. Moreover, decolonising the curriculum requires changes in content and

shifts in pedagogy, assessment practices, and institutional culture (Smith, 2012). Therefore, moving forward, addressing the appropriateness of the curriculum for a diverse and pluralistic society in South African higher education requires a comprehensive and sustained commitment to transformational change. This includes engaging in dialogue with diverse stakeholders, investing in faculty development and training, and creating spaces for critical reflection and debate on issues of identity, power, and knowledge production in the curriculum. By embracing a vision of education that is inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of all learners, South African higher education institutions can contribute to the realisation of a more just and inclusive society (Jansen & Walters, 2022).

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings in this study elucidate the complexities surrounding curriculum transformation within higher education, with a specific focus on the South African context. Drawing on theoretical insights and empirical data, the findings offer critical reflections on the challenges, tensions, and opportunities inherent in efforts to reform curricula and promote social justice within higher education institutions (Fanon, 2008; Njamnjoh, 2012; Smith, 2012). The analysis begins by examining the historical legacies of apartheid and their enduring impact on higher education in South Africa. Through a critical lens informed by scholars such as Mamdani (1996) and Nzimande (2015), the findings underscore the deep-rooted inequalities and systemic barriers that have historically marginalised Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities within the higher education system. Central to the discussion is the exploration of how critical race theory (CRT) provides a robust framework for understanding and interrogating the racialised dynamics of curriculum transformation. Building on the foundational work of Delgado and Stefancic (2017) and Ladson-Billings (1998), the findings highlight how CRT elucidates how race, power, and knowledge intersect within educational contexts, shaping curriculum content, pedagogical practices and student experiences (Fanon, 2008).

Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of centring marginalised voices, perspectives, and knowledge systems in curriculum transformation. By engaging with the conceptual frameworks proposed by scholars such as Freire (1970) and Giroux (1988), the study emphasises the transformative potential of education in challenging dominant narratives and fostering critical consciousness among students and educators. The empirical findings shed light on the challenges and tensions encountered in implementing curriculum transformation initiatives within higher education institutions. Drawing on case analyses and qualitative inquiries, the study reveals the complexities of navigating resistance, contestation, and implementation gaps. Research by Badat (2010) and Cloete et al. (2016) provides valuable insights into the practical dimensions of curriculum reform efforts, highlighting the need for inclusive, participatory, and contextually relevant approaches.

Moreover, the findings illuminate various stakeholders' micro-level experiences and perspectives, including students, faculty, administrators, and community members. Through

narrative analyses and qualitative research methods, the study amplifies the voices and agency of marginalised communities impacted by curriculum transformation initiatives. Studies by Moletsane et al. (2013) and Nkoane (2018) provide nuanced insights into the lived realities of individuals navigating curriculum reform processes, revealing diverse viewpoints, challenges, and aspirations.

This study critically interrogates the implications of the findings for theory, practice, and policy in higher education. Synthesising theoretical insights with empirical data underscores the imperative of adopting inclusive, decolonial, and anti-racist approaches to curriculum transformation (Shay et al., 2016). It highlights the need for ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and collective action to address systemic inequities and advance social justice within higher education institutions (Smith, 2012). Furthermore, the author explores the implications of the findings for curriculum development, pedagogy, and student support services. It underscores the importance of centring diverse perspectives, histories, and epistemologies in curriculum design and implementation.

Additionally, the study emphasises the role of faculty development programmes and institutional policies in promoting inclusive teaching practices and fostering culturally responsive learning environments. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding curriculum transformation within higher education. The study advances conversations and efforts to promote equity, inclusion, and social justice within higher education institutions by critically engaging with theoretical insights and empirical data. The study offers valuable insights and recommendations for advancing transformative change in curriculum development, pedagogy, and institutional practices through its nuanced analysis and synthesis of existing literature.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

In conclusion, examining the appropriateness of the curriculum for a diverse and pluralistic society in South African higher education underscores the urgency and complexity of the task ahead. While progress has been made in recognising the need for inclusivity and diversity in the curriculum, significant challenges persist in translating these principles into concrete action. The Eurocentric bias inherent in many curricula and institutional resistance and resource constraints impede efforts to foster a more inclusive and responsive educational environment.

Moving forward, South African higher education institutions must prioritise curriculum transformation efforts that centre on equity, justice, and diversity. This entails adopting a holistic approach that encompasses changes in content and shifts in pedagogy, assessment practices, and institutional culture. Furthermore, meaningful engagement with diverse stakeholders, including students, faculty, administrators, and community members, is essential to ensuring that curriculum reform reflects the needs and aspirations of all learners. By embracing a vision of education that celebrates and values diversity, South African higher education institutions can contribute to creating a more just and inclusive society for all.

**Limitations of the study**

While this study endeavours to comprehensively analyse curriculum transformation in higher education institutions from equity and social justice perspectives, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the reliance on published literature may need to pay more attention to valuable insights from unpublished sources or grey literature, potentially limiting the breadth and depth of the review. Additionally, the focus on South African higher education contexts may restrict the generalizability of findings to other geographic regions or educational settings, warranting caution in extrapolating conclusions beyond the study's scope. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of curriculum transformation and the evolving discourse on equity and social justice necessitate ongoing inquiry and revision, highlighting the need for future research to address emerging issues and refine theoretical frameworks.

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