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Persistent Barriers to Quality Classroom Engagement in South Africa: Reflections on Three Decades Into Democracy

Authors:

Mosa Nkoko, PhD (mosan@dut.ac.za)
Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa

Abstract:

Despite significant progress towards educational transformation in post-apartheid South Africa, the quality of student engagement remains inconsistent and unequal, mostly among students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Based on an extensive literature review, this study will explore potential challenges to student participation in South African higher education classrooms three decades into democracy. By using secondary data that comprises journal articles, books, government publications, websites and other relevant sources, the study will analyse structural, socio-economic and pedagogical barriers that may continue to hinder inclusive engagement. It will investigate how historical inequalities, financial constraints, language policies and evolving digital divides may shape student experiences. The study's findings reveal that despite policy shifts implemented to redress apartheid inequalities, barriers to classroom engagement still exist and remain deeply rooted, limiting meaningful engagement for many students, especially those coming from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. These insights underscore the mismatch between policy objectives and the lived experiences of students, pointing to the need for a more nuanced understanding of transformation in South African higher education institutions.

Keywords:

Higher Education, Post-Apartheid, South Africa, Student Engagement.

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Introduction

In 1953, the apartheid government in South Africa introduced the Bantu Education Act (Act No. 47). This act led to the creation of 36 higher education institutions in South Africa with sharp racial divisions, cultures and languages of the coloured, Indians and whites (Vetten, 2025). It also gave the South African government the power to structure the education of Native South African children, separate from White South African children and impede the advancement of black children (Mtombeni, Shoba, and Kwanhi 2025). This education system brought African education under the control of the government while extending the policies of apartheid to black schools.

The African Studies Centre (2025) contended that “the white government made it clear that Bantu education was designed to teach African learners to be the ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’ for a white-run economy and society, regardless of an individual's abilities and aspirations”. Thus, apartheid education was intentionally designed and motivated to ensure that "white" South Africans were trained for managerial positions, thereby perpetuating their dominance in economic, political and social arenas of South African society (Cohen, 2024).

Nevertheless, the South African Higher Education system post-1994 has undergone significant changes. It represents unique opportunities and responsibilities to reform a fragmented and deeply discriminatory education system and develop a cohesive national system grounded in democracy, equity, redress, transparency, and participation.

Post-1994 educational reforms have been central to the nation’s reconstruction and development initiatives. In South Africa, two imperatives drive educational reforms (Department of Education 2001). First, “the government had to overcome the devastation of apartheid and provide a system of education that builds democracy, human dignity, equality and social justice. Second, a system of lifelong learning had to be established to enable South Africans to respond to the enormous economic and social challenges of the 21st century” (Department of Education, 2001:1). Many policy changes have occurred within the education sector to address educational inequalities and meet the needs of all citizens. The South African higher education sector has prioritised post-apartheid transformation through policy development and structural reform intended to contribute to the development of enlightened and critically constructive citizens (Mlambo, Saul, and Buys 2024).

The policy reforms have introduced a wide range of institutional manifestos and conditions aimed at being more responsive to the needs of society through bringing equity and excellence, and ideas of transformation in higher education (Mlambo, Saul, and Buys 2024; Namakula and Ndaba 2024). For instance, the White Paper on Higher Education of 1997 suggested that “if higher education is to contribute to the reconstruction and development of South Africa and existing centres of excellence

maintained, the inequities, imbalances and distortions that derive from its past and present structure must be addressed, and higher education transformed to meet the challenges of a new non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society committed to equity, justice and a better life for all.

Since 1994, universities have expanded access to a broader range of students from diverse backgrounds, and enrolment numbers have increased dramatically (Mlambo, Saul, and Buys 2024; Namakula and Ndaba, 2024). Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean students are being engaged effectively. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of this issue, it is essential to examine classroom engagement.

This paper explores how systemic inequalities, many of which persist in structural and institutional forms, present challenges to the democratic ideals of providing equitable and meaningful learning experiences through constructive engagements. As such, classroom engagement in South African higher education must be understood within the broader context of post-apartheid democratic aspirations.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in two concepts: classroom engagement and democracy, as they are relevant to understanding the experiences of South African students in higher education. The framework guides the exploration of persistent barriers that hinder equitable, meaningful classroom engagement despite a policy shift in higher education thirty years after apartheid.

Classroom engagement in higher education is a complex concept with multiple definitions (Foster, 2023; Zepke, 2024). Classroom engagement is widely understood as a useful proxy for academic success, persistence and retention (Heilporn, Raynault, and Frenette 2024). Student engagement denotes student efforts devoted to learning activities within the context of institutional guides and rule (Khatter, Thalaachawr, and Blyth 2024). Student engagement requires dynamic sense-making and responding to the educational context (Cohen 2024; Chen 2025). In this study, it is referred to the level of active participation and involvement students demonstrate during a college or university class. This includes actively contributing to the learning process through discussions, asking questions, completing tasks, and applying knowledge rather than passively receiving information from a lecturer.

Classroom engagement is a significant determinant of student success and learning outcomes. Student engagement is considered a reliable predictor of learning and academic success and includes the interactions, discussions, and collaborative efforts that take place within the educational environment. Student engagement plays a significant role in shaping educational achievement in the higher education system (Li and Xue, 2023; Benjamin, 2024) and includes comprehensive participation in educational practices for effective learning with expected outcomes. While factors contributing towards student

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success are numerous and often beyond the control of universities, classroom engagement is a key part of overall student engagement and is one factor that can be influenced or enhanced.

Classroom engagement is a complex construct that includes the sociocultural nature of the classroom experience of lecturers and students (Zepke 2024). However, the reality is that for many students, particularly those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, the quality of student engagement remains inconsistent and unequal. Persistent barriers continue to limit active classroom participation. These barriers stem not only from institutional challenges but also from historical inequalities, restrictive language policies, financial constraints, and socio-economic disparities. Even though there are studies that have explored aspects of these barriers, many of them focus on engagement activities that occur outside the classroom, resulting in a limited and comprehensive understanding of their impact on classroom engagement.

In this study, classroom engagement refers to the level of active participation and involvement students demonstrate during a college or university class. This includes actively contributing to the learning process through discussions, asking questions, completing tasks, and applying knowledge rather than passively receiving information from a lecturer.

Similarly, the definition of democracy has been contested, as many countries define it differently. Democracy is best learned in a democratic setting where the freedom of participation and expression is encouraged (Dewey 2024). Active classroom engagement in a democratic setting not only constitutes a pedagogical goal but also an imperative. Omodan et al. (2025:1) assert that democratic approaches in classrooms are vital for promoting student participation, inclusivity, equitable collaboration, and critical thinking. They add that these approaches allow for a thorough examination of assumptions from multiple perspectives and encourage active student engagement. A liberalised education model emphasises dialogue and critical engagement, which allows learners to actively engage in their education and understand societal structures of power and oppression (Cavalcanti and Silva 2024).

This perspective holds the view that education should always embrace a political dimension, to empower individuals to challenge the status quo and transform their realities (Cavalcanti and Silva 2024). Thus, schools should create learning environments where students can learn and practice democracy. However, the ideals of democracy, rooted in education policy, may be undermined by structural, socioeconomic, and pedagogical barriers that continue to shape the classroom engagement experiences of students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

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Literature Review

Perspectives on Higher Education in South Africa

Drawing on contributions of different scholars, this section explores different perspectives on how segregated racial policies and post-apartheid reforms shaped higher education institutions in addressing historical inequalities. Additionally, this section examines classroom engagement and pedagogical methodologies across these historical contexts. It engages with ongoing scholarly debates regarding the degree of transformation within South African higher education and identifies persistent areas of continuity, tension, and contention.

The Bantu education curriculum was conveyed through racially, linguistically and culturally segregated school spaces, and the racially calibrated provision of financial, human and material resources that enabled acute differences in spatial conditions to characterise the racialised schools (Mlambo, Saul, and Buys 2024). The Extension of University Education Act of 1959 introduced segregation into the education system, and Blacks were denied admission to universities reserved for whites without a special permit. At the time, the four Afrikaans-speaking universities and one English-speaking university admitted only white students, while the other five had a restricted admissions policy (Thomas and Maree 2024).

Further, black South Africans were forced to adopt languages such as English and Afrikaans, which were imposed by discriminatory policies (Mthombeni, 2024:100). Makoni, Idem, and Rudwick (2024) assert that Eurocentric linguistic ideology predominantly marginalised indigenous African languages and their speakers. In contrast, the Afrikaans language received all the necessary resources and development to support the low-domain linguistic variety it initially constituted in the early nineteenth century, into the high-function standard language (Aiseng, 2024). English and Afrikaans were medium of instruction for the curriculum. As a result of the Bantu education system, Black students' access to high-quality English language models was virtually eliminated, and thinking along racial lines was entrenched in people's minds. Individuals who completed training programs through the Bantu Education system graduated with inadequate pedagogical skills and limited proficiency in English from the colleges (Ramatsetse, and Zenda 2024).

Moreover, educational inequality also highlighted disparities in funding. Spending on Afrikaans students by the government was notably higher compared to other groups. Resources were distributed to favour institutions along race lines at the expense of the other institutions. The inequitable resource distribution among the institutions in turn led to differences in the amount and quality of formal schooling between learners (Thomas and Maree, 2024; Ramatsetse, and Zenda, 2024; Makoni, Idem, and Rudwick, 2024). The policies and funding disparities in schools resulted in disparate access to higher education.

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The Bantu education schools suffered terribly due to governmental neglect. As the African Studies Centre (2025) noted, “enormous disparities in funding between white and black schools and student-teacher ratios adversely affected the quality of education for black students”. In addition, “the Bantu Education Act of 1955 made matters worse by mandating that African education be funded by the general poll tax collected from Africans rather than from the General Revenue Account used to fund white education,” African Studies Centre (2025). Even after the separate account was abolished in 1972, the education of African children remained grossly under-resourced, receiving one-tenth of the money afforded to whites and struggling with 56:1 student-teacher ratios (Hartshorne, 1992). Black communities became the most disadvantaged group, especially those in rural and/or township settings with poor-resourced schools because during the apartheid regime, communities were divided by race and geography to the extent that educational resources were unequally distributed to the point where a huge rift was evident between the white and black communities (Chiramba and Ndofirepi, 2023:57).

In the apartheid era, black university colleges were expensive, with low government spending in proportion to the black population. (Mzileni and Noveve 2025). African school funds were depleted to pay for African university colleges, and this divided university system produced far more white graduates, in a wider range of disciplines, than black graduates. This also affected the quality of teachers. With a few options for professionally trained teachers, schools hired underqualified educators, many of whom lacked university degrees. This was a move that apartheid supporters hailed as an increase in the number of teachers available to Black primary schools (Chiramba and Ndofirepi, 2023). This means that even if students could break through working-class instruction with under-qualified teachers in overcrowded classrooms, they still faced financial barriers to achieving their academic goals.

Following South Africa's first non-racial election in April 1994, the new Government of National Unity issued a call to the country’s universities to move beyond historical divisions and commit themselves to the objectives of national reconstruction. Since the apartheid era, many policy changes have occurred within education to try to address educational inequalities. Scott and Ivala (2019:22) write that towards the end of the 1990s, the current South African Higher Education system began creating benchmarks to assist South African higher education institutions (HEIs) in responding to the new realities of transforming past apartheid policies and practices while educating and servicing a diverse population of students simultaneously.

Mlambo, Saul, and Buys (2024) indicate that the transformation of the higher education sector is about ensuring that obvious barriers to access to education imposed by the apartheid regime are dismantled so that the higher education sector can become more inclusive and widen access and participatory outcomes. Not only was there great anticipation that the education system would be fundamentally transformed by dismantling the old apartheid (Ramatsetse, and Zenda, 2024), but there was hope that

students, with the set academic and intellectual development goals, would achieve the academic success which "leads to progression in, and completion of the studies that students enrol for and ultimately leads to the graduation of the students with the relevant higher education qualifications" (Saidi, 2020: 2).

Despite policy and system reviews (such as curriculum and degree reforms, programme extension and introduction of foundation programmes, institutional mergers, changes in admission criteria, and increased funding for student fees and residence), barriers to classroom engagement remain. This observation aligned with Mzangwa (2019:2), who argues that the amendments in higher education policy have not resulted in significant improvements in terms of access, equity and participation. On the contrary, the rich continue to afford and gain access to Higher Education whilst the poor majority, consisting of black people, seem not to benefit from the introduction of policies aimed at transforming higher education in South Africa (Mzileni, and Noveve 2025). This is owing to a number of reasons, among them, poor implementation of policy and a lack of monitoring with respect to compliance with the current policies, resulting in a decided lack of success in redressing and transforming the higher education system (Mzangwa, 2019:2).

Amidst all these competing perspectives, it is evident that while education during apartheid aimed to control and limit participation, democratic reforms focused on fostering inclusivity, yet systemic challenges persist. These complexities make it essential to critically examine the barriers to classroom engagement in South African higher education.

Barriers to Quality Classroom Engagement

Woldegiorgis and Chiramba (2025) contend that socioeconomic background is one of the determinants of students' access and participation in higher education. In South Africa, Students from a poor social background are often from a particular race, mainly black, and face significant barriers in accessing certain higher education institutions (HEIs). The few students who manage to gain access find it difficult to participate up to an acceptable level since they are usually ill-prepared as the result of poor high school education and the less-resourced background from which they come (Mzangwa, 2019:4). This above notion is supported by (Shange, 2019:39), stating that the quality of education obtained from previous high school, language and technological barriers, the institutional support as well as residential dynamics are just some of the countless socio-economic factors which are faced by students which affect their academic performance. Bepari, Barua, and Rabbi (2024) add that classrooms with high levels of engagement are not dependent on student quality but are influenced by the background of students, the expectations and guidance of family and peers, as well as institutional and classroom practices. This raises questions regarding the quality of education received by students from

disadvantaged social backgrounds compared to those who are from a well-resourced social background.

Language, as previously mentioned, continues to impact students' academic engagement in HEI's. In South Africa, struggles related to linguistic barriers have long been a persistent issue. Language rights issues can be traced back to the 1976 protest instruction in Afrikaans, which went down in history as an unparalleled catastrophe. Following the abolition of apartheid in the 1990s, new laws and policies about education in South Africa were implemented. One major change in the education sector was the revision of the language policy, as outlined in section 27 (2) of the Higher Education Act of South Africa. "The role of language and access to language skills is critical to ensure the right of individuals to realise their full potential to participate in and contribute to the social, cultural, intellectual, economic and political life of South African society" (Ministry of Education, 2002:4). In 2023, the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) received a considerable number of complaints perceived to be a violation of marginalised linguistic human rights and languages (Rakgogo, 2024). For many learners from underrepresented backgrounds, language is a primary obstacle to inclusion in higher education. As a result, when English is the primary language of instruction, students who are not fluent may struggle not only with academic reading and writing but also with engaging meaningfully in classroom discussions.

Some scholars have noted that while all students can encounter challenges in mastering discipline-specific language, a significant body of research suggests that learners from historically underrepresented backgrounds are more likely to encounter substantial and persistent linguistic obstacles to their academic engagement in higher education (Rakgogo, 2024; Thango, 2025). They further contend that these challenges often arise from disparities between their primary linguistic practices and those that are favoured within academic settings. Burke (2020: 202) explains that the impact of these linguistic barriers on learners' academic progress is often misinterpreted as a lack of capacity or motivation for succeeding in higher education, fuelling deficit models of non-dominant language background students and undermining the transformative potential of tertiary education. It is important to note that the South African student population in higher education is linguistically diverse, and it is not uncommon to find a variety of home languages represented in the student body of a single institution (Ministry of Education, 2002:6). Equally important is the fact that English is often used as the medium of instruction (MOI) in South African higher education.

Furthermore, financial problems affect academic achievement, and this seems to be a crucial barrier to learning for students nationally (Zickafoose, Ilesanmi, Diaz-Manrique, Adeyemi, Walumbe, Strong, Wingenbach, Rodriguez, and Dooley 2024). The issues preventing students from engaging align with the previous research, which identified that many factors and "forces' can impact upon non-engagement, namely: socio-economic, financial and other commitments whilst studying. Pascoe et.al (2020) assert

that students who are unable to overcome funding hurdles are faced with even more daunting challenges. These include but are not limited to increased dropout rates, diminished academic performance and focus, higher levels of student debt that may have lasting impacts on their future, restricted access to essential resources that can significantly influence their learning outcomes, heightened mental and emotional strain, limited employment opportunities, and fewer desirable educational pathways (Pascoe et.al, 2020; Chiramba and Ndofirepi, 2023:57). To add on this, many students that attend universities today have positions of responsibility to care for other people, whilst at the same time work for financial reasons. Zickafoose et al. (2024) acknowledge this issue and have highlighted that now, more than ever, universities need to offer flexible and lifelong learning opportunities for students of all ages and backgrounds to accommodate such concerns.

With the shift to digital learning, a new barrier has emerged: the digital divide. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019, it has affected many different sectors, including the deep inequalities in access to technology in higher education. The pandemic affected South African higher education institutions and students during lockdowns and led to a shutdown of face-to-face learning services and the implementation of remote online learning to prevent the ensuing educational crisis. Woldegiorgis (2022:198) posits that lockdown and restricted social interaction resulted in unprecedented challenges associated with the physical meeting of students and lecturers at higher education institutions. Ahmad (2020) indicates that many South African Higher education institutions entered an uncharted territory and worked with other countries to find hi-tech, low-tech and no-tech solutions to ensure the continuity of learning.

Nonetheless, many were not ready for a complete transition from face-to-face teaching to online systems, because they did not have the infrastructure or resources to facilitate a complete switch to virtual delivery immediately (Woldegiorgis, 2022; Kele & Mzilen, 2021; Menon & Motala, 2021). These challenges affected some students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as accessing technology is not easily affordable. For instance, some students had limited internet and data access, a lack of personal devices and unequal technology literacy. Supporting the above views, a study conducted by Mututwa and Matsilele (2024) revealed that “most of the participants expressed that while they were digitally literate, they faced technical challenges in connecting to the online classes. Online classes were conducted via Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, and WhatsApp, but these were fraught with challenges ranging from unavailability of hardware devices such as laptops, reliable Android phones, and earphones”. Additionally, Cable.co.uk (2020) highlighted in a report that South Africa had the highest data costs in Africa. Therefore, the high cost of data alienated them from accessing online learning, which led to underperformance, as they were unable to conduct extensive research for their assignments.

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Methodology

This study utilised a critical thematic literature review to investigate persistent barriers to classroom engagement in South African higher education, three decades post-democracy. The article draws on a wide range of secondary sources, including scholarly journal articles, government publications, historical analyses, institutional reports, and reliable grey literature (Gul, Shah, Ahmad, Gulzar, & Shabir 2021). Thematic analysis is also useful for summarising key features of a large dataset, as it forces the researcher to take a well-structured approach to handling data, helping to produce a clear and organised final report (Verger, Roberts, Guiller, and McAloney-Kocaman, 2024). Sources were included if they addressed issues relating to classroom engagement, inequality, access, pedagogy, or policy in South African higher education. The common six-step process that were followed in this study was familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up (Caulfield, 2023). Following this process also helped to avoid confirmation bias when formulating one's analysis. Confirmation bias, as Modgil, Singh, Gupta, and Dennehy (2024) connotes the tendency to seek out and prefer information that supports our preexisting beliefs. The analysis focused on identifying and interpreting recurring patterns, contradictions, and critical issues within the literature related to student engagement in South African higher education. The sources were read closely, annotated, and re-examined to understand how themes such as financial precarity, language exclusion, curriculum alienation, and digital inequality consistently emerge across different texts.

Rather than treating themes as isolated findings, the study viewed them as overlapping and interrelated, reflecting broader structural conditions and historical continuity. An emphasis was placed on the ideological undercurrents within policy texts, institutional reports, and academic discourse, with special attention to how these sources frame or obscure the lived realities of students from historically marginalised backgrounds.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings of the study, which highlight a range of interconnected barriers that affect students' engagement and success in South African higher education. These barriers are broadly situated within structural, socio-economic, and pedagogical domains. However, as the findings demonstrate, these categories often overlap and intersect, making it difficult to isolate their effects entirely. For this reason, the findings are presented thematically, focusing on specific challenges identified by the literature, such as language, financial constraints, curriculum relevance and the digital divide. Each theme reflects multiple dimensions of disadvantage, underscoring the complexity of access and participation in higher education for students from marginalised backgrounds.

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Socio-Economic Background

The literature consistently highlights the socio-economic status of students as an important determinant in student engagement and performance. Tomaszewski et.al (2022:135) note that individuals from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds experience greater exposure to stressors and barriers to educational success at multiple stages of the life course, which can result in educational trajectories that differ from those of more advantaged backgrounds. In the South African context, some students from low socio-economic backgrounds often come from ill-equipped high schools with under-qualified teachers and environments that are not conducive to learning. Mundoc, Lerin, Gioca, Ulama, Orillaneda, Salarda, and Ralla (2024) have argued that low-income families face demanding situations with education, because of the competing needs amid a paucity of resources. The socioeconomic reality often hinders their educational advancements. Insufficient resources make it difficult for individuals with low incomes to meet up adequately with family obligations (Zakayo and Onyango 2024).

Therefore, students who cannot overcome the hurdles of funding are confronted with even more daunting challenges. For instance, Chiramba and Ndofirepi study (2023:70) found that “most students highlight the positive impact of financial assistance from NSFAS on their education and their family’s financial well-being. It underscores the importance of support systems like NSFAS in creating opportunities and alleviating financial burdens for students, especially in situations where families may struggle to afford higher education expenses. Nevertheless, some students depend on financial aid or bursaries that do not fully cover essential living expenses such as food, transportation, and accommodation. In such cases, they may need to undertake part-time employment to make ends meet. This additional responsibility can limit the time and energy they can commit to their studies, leading to fatigue, absenteeism and reduced participation, which may adversely affect their engagement in the classroom.

Shange (2019:38) corroborated the above claims, stating that “financial stress may lead to some students seeking part-time jobs, leaving them exhausted and unable to fully participate in their studies. Thus, students become preoccupied with finding ways of addressing and meeting their other financial needs such as living, accommodation, resources for assignments and registration fees”. Pascoe et.al (2020) opined that these challenges include but are not limited to increased dropout rates, diminished academic performance and focus, higher levels of student debt that may have lasting impacts on their future, restricted access to essential resources that can significantly influence their learning outcomes, heightened mental and emotional strain, limited employment opportunities, and fewer desirable educational pathways. Funding in the South African higher education context should not primarily be based on paying university fees. Shange (2019) concludes that when this occurs, the needs of impoverished students are not fully met, and it creates unnecessary psychological stress for them.

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Language

Several studies (Rakgogo, 2024; Thango, 2025; Burke, 2020) reveal that language diversity in South African higher education poses a significant challenge to effective classroom engagement. Language barriers in South African higher education constitute a substantial obstacle to effective classroom engagement. With 11 official languages and a history of colonialism and apartheid, English often dominates as the medium of instruction, potentially hindering academic achievement and comprehension among students whose proficiency is higher in indigenous languages. This assertion aligns with Rakgokgo (2024), elucidating that English remains the dominant language of instruction, communication, teaching and learning as well as the language of research in the South African Higher Education space. However, not all students entering higher education have proficient English skills, which may impact their level of classroom engagement, leading to underperformance, which can discourage them to learn. For example, Students with limited English language proficiency may encounter difficulties in participating in class discussions or articulating their ideas effectively if their English language proficiency is limited. This can result in reduced participation and may restrict opportunities for learning and academic growth.

Learner competence in the language of instruction is key to the learner's success, as incomprehension of learning materials inevitably leads to failure in most cases. Incomprehensible education is dangerous to societal growth and development (Ngidi et.al, 2022; Boylu, 2024). Poor school performance and other literacy difficulties are attributable to a lack of mother-tongue education (Chizwina, Mashiyane, Ramabina, Mahlangu, Kenny-Manotwana, and Moyo 2025). Most learners in South Africa learn through an L2 medium (second language, English), in most schools and institutions of higher learning (Mohohlwane, Taylor, Cilliers, and Fleisch, 2024). Nishanthi (2020) further explains that learning in one's home language not only eliminates the learning barrier presented by L2 instruction but also increases participation and engagement. Speaking more than one language in one conversation in one day is more common in Africa (Chizwina et al, 2024). Consequently, universities, like other educational institutions, are expected to reflect this diversity in their language policies. Such policies would accommodate students who must struggle with English as a medium of instruction (MOI) while competing alongside peers whose first language is English. From this perspective, South Africa's education system needs to implement strategic measures to strengthen the inclusion of historically marginalised languages as mediums of instruction.

Curriculum Relevance

The literature (Mahabeer, 2021; Asea, 2022) also highlights that the South African education curriculum is heavily centred on Eurocentric epistemologies, theories, and frameworks. According to Du Plessis (2021:56),

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the South African education system continues to navigate a colonial past within the context of global shifts and social changes. Many elements of South African education have remained untouched or unchanged. This is seen in the way that the curriculum is structured in schools, access to quality education, and the fact that many South African schools are still structured according to a class system.

Dlamini (2016) also acknowledges that South African universities continue to embrace international practices to be well-positioned in global university rankings. Similarly, Tella (2021:237) corroborated the above assertions, indicating that, despite more than two-and-a-half decades of black majority rule, South African higher education embraces European models and paradigms. Even though higher education in South Africa has made efforts to decolonise the curriculum through the indigenisation of their academic programmes during post-2015-2016 student protests, the integration of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) has been downplayed. Universities such as the University of KwaZulu–Natal, Northwest University, and Unisa have initiated the integration of IK into their academic projects, but it has become a challenging mission (Makokotlela and Gumbo, 2025). As a result, the exclusion of IK and local case studies makes learning in formal environments feel alienating rather than engaging and supportive.

Digital Divide

Finally, an emergent theme relates to the digital divide within the South African Higher Education sector. Russo and Emtage (2024:81) explain that the COVID-19 pandemic shone a light on the inequities stemming from disparities in digital experiences, resources, and usage patterns. Although Palvia et al. (2018) point out that online learning in higher education was mainly the result of the fast-paced developments in ICT for the ever-evolving digital economy, the global outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 impacted the delivery of higher education services in South Africa and this exposed an expanse of digital divide, as some students, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, could not transition seamlessly to remote learning due to limited access to technological devices, as not all students have laptops or smartphones. Some students also had to rely on shared devices, which hindered them from allocating sufficient time to do thorough research and complete their assignments on time.

Previous research (Hasan & Bao, 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2020) into the inequalities arising from the emergence of digital technologies has incorporated socioeconomic factors, especially gender, age, race, educational level, income, and habitat (Azionya and Nhedzi, 2021:165). Adam, Kaye, T., and Haßler (2020) point out that “due to digital inequalities and lack of access to current technology, students from lower-income families have limited or no access to online classes. At the same time, excessive data costs present an obstacle to accessing online-classes”. Consequently, high data costs further perpetuate inequalities in classroom participation.

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Conclusion

This paper delves into the multifaceted challenges faced by students from historically disadvantaged communities with regard to classroom engagement in South African higher education. While there have been changes in higher education policy aimed at addressing the apartheid disparities and promoting inclusivity, as well as ensuring equitable access to education and classroom engagement, challenges persist. Structural, socio- economic, pedagogical and digital divides are barriers that continue to pose significant obstacles to meaningful classroom participation in South African higher education. Thus, it is very crucial to address the historical inequalities to ensure that all students are provided with fair and equal opportunities to succeed in higher education. Doing so will also help South African higher education institutions foster a more inclusive learning environment, thereby improving student retention rates. In a nutshell, creating an inclusive classroom environment is a shared responsibility that extends beyond the lecturer. It requires a collaborative effort involving institutions to provide resources such as academic support centres, digital access programs, and comprehensive financial assistance beyond tuition. Recognizing and addressing these barriers is important to fostering an educational environment where all students can actively engage and succeed, regardless of their backgrounds.

Beyond these observations, this study offers significant theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, it highlights that classroom engagement in South African higher education should not be viewed solely as an individual or behavioral matter, but rather as a phenomenon influenced by historical contexts, socio-economic disparities, and democratic participation. It also contributes to discussions on decolonizing education by ishowing how linguistic and curricular exclusions continue to hinder meaningful engagement, thereby emphasising the importance of frameworks that incorporate social justice and inclusivity into engagement theory. Practically, the findings emphasise that transformation policies must move beyond access to address the conditions that hinder equitable participation. This requires implementing inclusive language policies, reforming curricula to integrate local knowledge, providing comprehensive financial and technological support, strengthening academic development programmes, and equipping educators with participatory pedagogical strategies. Furthermore, regular monitoring of engagement among diverse student populations can inform data-driven interventions. Addressing these areas will not only improve classroom participation and academic performance but also support the development of democratic values within South African higher education institutions.

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