

Teacher Educators in South Africa: Critically Examining Structural Inequalities and Sustainability through a Pedagogy of Discomfort

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Abstract

Education is seen as a key vehicle to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Teacher educators play a pivotal role in training teachers and UNESCO advocates that Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is mainstreamed through teacher education to contribute towards achieving the SDGs. For education to contribute to a more sustainable future, a focus on root causes to inequality in society, such as structural racism, and how to dismantle these structures, should be central. Drawing on empirical data from reflective dialogue interviews with 10 teacher educators at three universities in South Africa, this article explores their pedagogical approaches to include the concept of structural racism in their praxis. Their strategies for critically examining structural racism, in the context of South Africa, are considered in relation to relevant literature on critical pedagogy. The article further reflects on how this work relates to ESD and its aim for education to contribute to transformation to a more equal and just world. Based on the empirical work, the article argues that pedagogies of discomfort (and love) are important approaches for education to contribute to societal transformation through critically examining the root causes of inequalities and injustices.

Keywords: pedagogy of discomfort; Education for Sustainable Development (ESD); inequality; structural racism; social transformation; pedagogy of love; teacher education



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Introduction

In the mainstream education paradigm education is seen as a means to equip people with the necessary knowledges and skills to become active citizens, who contribute to their societies through work and economic development (Cho 2012, 18). Furthermore, and increasingly, education is also presented as a key enabler towards transformation for a more sustainable future (UNESCO 2020). For example, UNESCO's (2020) roadmap states that the implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) towards 2030 "can provide the knowledge, awareness and action that empower people to transform themselves and transform societies" (2). One key issue here is how education can contribute to prepare students to better understand inequalities, in order to transform structures that sustain such inequalities related to "race",¹ as well as class and gender (Darder, Hayes II, and Ryan 2023). This article explores pedagogical approaches that can critically examine these structural mechanisms of inequalities, with a particular focus on structural racism, which needs to be dismantled as part of education's response to the call for a more sustainable future. Structural racism here refers to the ways societies "allocate differential economic, political, social, and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines; lines that are socially constructed" (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 474).

Within educational science there is extensive work in the fields of transformative learning (Mezirow 2000) and sustainability education (Grund, Singer-Brodowski, and Büssing 2024; Rodríguez Aboytes and Barth 2020), as well as critical pedagogy (Darder et al. 2023) and anti-racism education (Dei and McDermott 2014; Verma 2022), but less focus on the nexus of anti-racism education and sustainability education (Carstensen-Egwuom and Schröder 2022). The relative absence of addressing racism within ESD is also evident in global UNESCO policy documents (Phuthi and Griffiths, forthcoming). In this article, sustainability is understood as a holistic concept that includes environmental, social, economic, and political dimensions of development (O'Donoghue 2007). From this position ESD should also address structural inequalities that characterise contemporary societies (Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2022). With the current global push to include sustainability at all educational levels, it is necessary to address this connection to avoid reproducing inequalities. There are some initiatives that address structural racism and coloniality, for example through the work on "critical climate justice" (Sultana 2022), but there is potential for further development (Trott et al. 2023).

Grounded in critical theory and the need for critical work on the transformative potential of education, this article explores pedagogical approaches that critically examine structural racism. The empirical data is from interviews with 10 teacher educators at three universities in South Africa, where they reflect on their pedagogical approaches to examine the concept of structural racism and how it relates to other mechanisms of structural inequalities. The examples are then discussed in relation to education's role

1 "Race" is in quotation marks to signal that it is a socially constructed phenomenon and has no biological validity.

in transforming societies and the sustainability agenda, as promoted through ESD. The aim here is not to investigate how teacher educators implement ESD, but rather to consider the teacher educators' work and reflections on structural racism, and how this relates to sustainability education. Based on the empirical data, I argue that a "pedagogy of discomfort" (Boler 1999) can contribute to efforts to confront and critically question established perceptions about social issues and as such enable a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of structural racism and other inequalities—which is central when addressing sustainability.

The article starts with a discussion of relevant literature on teaching for change with emphasis on critical pedagogy and transformative learning, including ESD literature. The context of the empirical data is then discussed before presenting the methods applied in this research. The final sections present the analysis and discuss the pedagogical approaches of the teacher educators and relate this to the sustainability agenda.

Critical Pedagogy for Structural Change

As illustrated in the volumes by Darder (Darder, Mayo, and Paraskeva 2015; Darder et al. 2023), there is a deep and wide literature on critical pedagogy across the world. Critical pedagogy involves several aspects of learning, including what is being taught (curriculum), how we teach and learn (pedagogy), and the politics of schooling and education (Cho 2012). A central perspective in critical pedagogy is the importance of an "analysis of oppressive structures, practices and theories with the ambition to bring about 'demystification' and 'liberation from dogmatism'", which in turn leads towards human emancipation (Biesta 2017, 54). As such, critical pedagogy examines and unpacks the unequal power structures that are both open and hidden for us, through dialogical critical inquiry and conscientisation (Freire 1972).

Freire (1972) played a central role in developing key concepts of critical pedagogy, including his later work on the pedagogy of hope (Freire 1995). According to Darder (2014, 51), Freire was

adamant about the political necessity to unveil authoritarian pedagogies in the classroom, which curtail the pleasure of life and the principle of love, generating in both teachers and students a sense of alienation and estrangement from self and the world.

In this sense, Freire's pedagogy of hope and pedagogy of love were a response to the "dehumanizing forces so prevalent in hegemonic schooling" (Darder 2014, 51). According to Freire (1972), liberation is a process of humanisation where people become their authentic selves, a process involving students *and* teachers through praxis.

The importance of engaging with political issues through critical inquiry in education is also central in hooks's (1994) work. In *Teaching to Transgress* she writes that education can be the practice of freedom, which in her US context was the antiracist struggle, and

that it was this that made her love learning: “School was the place of ecstasy—pleasure and danger. To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure. But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone” (hooks 1994, 3). In the context of South Africa, which we will return to in the section below, the role of education was also crucial in the liberation struggle against apartheid (Vally 2020).

As is clear here, critique is central in critical pedagogy through unpacking and understanding power structures, specifically relating to class, gender, and “race”, alongside an emphasis on a pedagogy of hope, seeing possibilities for alternative systems and futures (Cho 2012). The field of critical pedagogy is extensive, and the focus that follows is on a pedagogy of discomfort and the transformative agenda within this field.

Pedagogy of Discomfort

Key elements of critical pedagogy include critical inquiry, dialogue, teachers and students as intellectuals, and education as a change agent (Cho 2012, 71); however, there are various interpretations of how critical pedagogy should be carried out in the classroom. One example is the concept of a “pedagogy of discomfort” (Boler 1999), which “begins by inviting educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others” (Boler 1999, 176). Critical inquiry “often means asking students to radically reevaluate their worldviews” (Boler and Zembylas 2003, 107). According to Boler (1999), this should be a collective witnessing process, and “a central focus is to recognize how emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see” (176). The feeling of discomfort is seen as a resource in the teaching setting (Røthing 2019), through which students and teachers can explore emotions of anger, fear, and defensiveness, and why they occur when discussing difficult topics related to class, “race” and/or gender (Boler 1999; Boler and Zembylas 2003). An important part of a pedagogy of discomfort is that it involves the educator as much as the students in engaging with difficult topics and emotions:

The educator who endeavors to rattle complacent cages, who attempts to “wrest us anew” from the threat of conformism, undoubtedly faces the treacherous ghosts of the other’s fears and terrors, which in turn evoke one’s own demons. The path of understanding, if it is not to “simplify,” must be tread gently. (Boler 1999, 175)

Addressing difficult topics and emotions intentionally requires one to “tread gently” and act with care for each other. Teachers also have to be aware of how discussions that are uncomfortable for some students might be an experience of hope and affirmation for others (Røthing 2019, 53). Hence, the matter of the classroom as a “safe space” evokes the question of “safe for whom?” Røthing (2019) argues that the question should not be “whether teachers should evoke discomfort or not among the students, but rather how comfort and discomfort should be *allocated* among the students, and whether the

teachers can manage the students' comfort and discomfort" (53; my translation and italics). Similarly, Boler (1999) argues for "witnessing" and not "spectating", recognising that "how we see or choose not to see has ethical implications" (194) when dealing with difficult topics that are often silenced or ignored in mainstream education (183). As Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker (2023) argue, the danger of silencing topics, such as racism, is that they are normalised in the process. A pedagogy of discomfort can as such be seen as "counterwork", involving both cognitive and emotional labour (Boler and Zembylas 2003, 108–109). Such pedagogy became prevalent in the reflective dialogues with the teacher educators in South Africa, which will be discussed in the analysis section.

Educating for Transformation

Discussing possibilities for a more equal and just future and how teachers can contribute to this through their work with students is also central in critical pedagogy. This agenda connects with theories of "transformative learning", a process involving several steps in which students engage in critical reflection on a "disorienting dilemma", eventually leading to new perspectives that students may integrate into their lives (Mezirow 2000). This process of transformative learning, similar to a pedagogy of discomfort, involves students' emotions through "self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame" (Mezirow 2000, 22).

Transformative and affective learning is also central in sustainability education. In Grund, Singer-Brodowski, and Büssing's (2024) systematic review on "Emotions and Transformative Learning for Sustainability", they found that "[a] growing body of research shows that emotions also play a central role when experiencing unsustainability and taking action for sustainability" (307). Based on their findings, they argue that sustainability education is not only a cognitive exercise, and suggest that "educators can create emotionally sensitive sustainability education, ... and adjust the level of emotional depth along with increasing trust" (Grund, Singer-Brodowski, and Büssing 2024, 319).

Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015) argue that Mezirow's "focus is mainly on cognitive transformation/s of individuals. This does not fully theorise the relationship between cognitive transformations and social action or agency, especially collective transformation of human activity" (75). This underscores the question of what or who should be in focus when teaching for transformation—individuals, society and/or structures. Another direction within transgressive learning sees the need for collective work by drawing from decolonial theories, valuing "disrupting competences", and addressing topics that have been silenced (Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2015, 77). An example of this kind of "counterwork" is Stein et al.'s (2022) approach, advocating for an "[e]ducation for the end of the world as we know it", addressing our "modern-colonial habits of being, which are underwritten by racial, colonial, and ecological violence" (275). Another example is Bozalek and Zembylas's (2017) work on response-able pedagogies and how this critical approach "might support transformative social agendas

within the limiting structures of post-apartheid South Africa” (81). They argue that this approach involves “recognition of power relations, materiality and entanglement” as well as “openness to listen, question, challenge, and reconfigure concepts (community, self and identity)” (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017, 80).

Critical pedagogy aims at unpacking and examining structural inequalities. Drawing on pedagogies of discomfort (and love), this involves both cognitive and emotional labour—by students and teachers. The transformative element is central here, whereby education, and ESD specifically, should include discussions of how to disrupt mechanisms of inequalities for a more just and equal future. According to Darder (2014 50),

Freire’s view of love as a dialectical force that simultaneously unites and respects difference, must be imagined as a radical sense of lived kinship, if we are to effectively transform the social and material conditions of inequality and disaffiliation that are the hallmark of capitalism.

The Context of the Study: Teacher Education in South Africa

The history of structural racism, as well as people’s resistance and struggle for liberation, including within education (Vally 2022), and the post 1994 transformation agenda, make South Africa an interesting context to study pedagogical approaches to critically examine structural racism. Teachers have been and are still playing a pivotal role in educating for a better future. As such, teacher educators in South Africa face both challenges and possibilities in training future teachers in a country that experiences massive inequality in society, including within the educational sector (Spaull and Jansen 2019).

An important series of events addressing unfinished debates of South Africa’s transformation process was the 2015–16 #RhodesMustFall followed by the #FeesMustFall student movements (Booyesen 2016). These initiatives, known as the “fallist movement”, mobilised university students across the country, voicing their demands for the decolonisation of education and a stop to the increase of student fees. As the movement shows, these debates are connected, addressing inequalities of the past and present, highlighting “that colonialism and decolonisation in South Africa are based on capitalism, currently configured in the markets, consumerism, and hyper-individualism of neoliberalism” (Christie 2020, 209).

Although major advances and achievements in equity measures have transpired since 1994, South Africa’s transformation process is moving slowly, and as such the term “transformation” is contested given its official use in post-apartheid policy, invoking unfulfilled promises (see e.g. Ntombana, Gwala, and Sibanda 2023). According to many critiques, it is moving too slow considering land reforms and unemployment, and South Africa is still the most unequal country in the world (Chatterjee, Czajka, and Gethin 2022).

Transformation is also a much-debated topic within higher education institutions. Despite initiatives, such as transformation offices/units at universities, a recent report on transformation at the 26 public universities in South Africa found that there are still many challenges (Luescher et al. 2023). According to the analysis, universities underwent transformation first regarding demographic equity of students and staff, and second with emphasis on institutional structures and processes in the two decades after 1994. The third phase, post 2013, displays an emphasis on epistemological equity and social justice through what they call “deep transformation”, influenced for example by the student movements: “In this period, it can be argued that South African public higher education has arrived at the point where it is now addressing the roots of inequity in its quest for a transformed system and institutions” (Luescher et al. 2023, xii). However, challenges related to all three phases are ongoing, for example in terms of access to university (Motala, Vally, and Maharajh 2018) and processes of decolonisation (see e.g. Jansen 2019).

It is in this context that teacher educators operate, with the legacy of the apartheid past and the aspirations for transformation, as well as the many structural changes in the education systems (Chisholm 2019). The push for transformation and equity is prevalent in the curriculum for grades R–12 (CAPS²), as illustrated in the extract below from the principles of CAPS:

- Social transformation: ensuring that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed, and that equal educational opportunities are provided for all sections of the population;
- Active and critical learning ...
- Human rights, inclusivity, environmental and social justice: ... sensitive to issues of diversity such as poverty, inequality, race, gender, language, age, disability. (Department of Basic Education [DBE], South Africa 2011, 4–5)

Thus, when teacher educators are preparing future teachers either through the four-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree or the one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), these principles are what the teachers are expected to promote. However, many teachers are not provided with adequate training or resources to actualise the laudable principles (Venna, Sikhakhane, and Stoddard 2024). Teacher educators at South African universities therefore play a pivotal role in preparing future teachers in how to address structural inequalities that persist today. Examples of how this can be done are explored in the sections below.

Research Methodology

This article draws from dialogue-based interviews conducted in the second semester of 2023 with 10 teacher educators (lecturers) at three universities in South Africa: the

2 CAPS: “Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements”. Grade R: “Reception” year.

University of Johannesburg (UJ), the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Rhodes University (RU). The participants were selected based on their prior experience of teaching about structural racism, and were identified through snowball sampling (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2017). Among the 10 teacher educators, three are men and seven are women, with variations in terms of their “race” identity and age. Inspired by decolonial research methods regarding knowledge ownership (Smith 2021), the participants could choose to have their identity known to acknowledge their knowledge contribution to this research. First names are used in the text for participants with known identity and full names are listed under “acknowledgements”. Pseudonyms are used for those who chose to be anonymous.

The interviews were based on the reflective practice research method consisting of three steps: 1) initial reflection, 2) critical reflection, and 3) theoretical reflection (Lindseth 2020). Prior to the interview, participants were asked to think of an example(s) from their teaching where they had taught on the topic of structural racism/structural inequalities and share this (in a descriptive sense) as the first step. The cases were mainly from courses for PGCE or BEd, with classes ranging from about 50–100 students at RU, to 200 at UCT and 400+ at UJ. The second and third step involved reflecting on what was at stake in the case that they shared, what they wanted their students to learn, and connecting this to theories of pedagogy. Although the method is presented as a linear process, the interviews moved back and forth within the steps. This is partly due to the participants being used to applying their analytical skills as academics and starting to analyse their own examples as they were sharing their cases in step one. This method is a form of self-reporting and does not involve the students’ perspectives. As such it provides insights into the teacher educators’ understanding and experience of their own praxis. Several of the participants shared that this method provided time to reflect on their own praxis, which was also interesting for them as there is minimal time for this kind of reflective work.

The individual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and then coded to identify main themes and sub-themes, focusing on content and pedagogical approaches (Braun et al. 2022). Drawing on decolonial methodology and inspired by Freire’s dialogical approach, the preliminary analysis and draft of this article was shared with the 10 participants together with an invitation to participate in a digital group dialogue where they could comment on the analysis and discussion. Those who were unable or not interested in participating in the group dialogue were given the opportunity to share comments in writing.

Throughout the process, considerations of research ethics and researcher’s positionality were central (Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2014). My observation is that the participants were open and direct when sharing their perspectives on structural racism, and the perspectives shared during the interviews addressed core issues that the teacher educators were engaged in. This reflects my general observation of academics in South Africa, after a longer research stay at UJ and participating at conferences, that in general,

academics do not shy away from probing critical questions, in a respectful manner, irrespective of other people's gender, "race", and/or position(s).

Analysis

In the following subsections I present and discuss data from the interviews focusing on the content/topic of teaching that critically examines structural racism. I then proceed with the teacher educators' pedagogical approaches, and finally how they relate their work to ESD and transformative learning.

Examining Structural Racism: Topics and Content

One topic that was used as an example of how the teacher educators critically examine structural inequalities and structural racism in their courses can be placed under the umbrella of "understanding schooling in South Africa". Learning about the educational system, past and present, is not surprisingly an important part of the teacher education curricula, but what is interesting is the level of critical engagement by the teacher educators. As Imran³ said, "the course is a critique of capitalism", addressing structural mechanisms of inequality. This is echoed by Jerome,⁴ who argued that in understanding history and today's system, the students need to understand "racial capitalism" (Alexander 2023) and "how schooling has always been racialised and gendered in South Africa" (Jerome). One of the examples Imran mentioned in this regard was the concept of meritocracy. Imran shared that in the course, they question "the functionalist [capitalist] mode, which indicates that those who work hard enough are going to get ahead" and used an example from class with a student reflecting on the experience of the course module: "If hard work was success, then the domestic workers in our houses would be the wealthiest on the planet. And she [the student] says, 'that sentence broke me'. That for me I think is enormously powerful" (Imran).

Another topic that came up was explorations of "what is a good teacher?", and how this is related to teacher agency or the need for social justice-oriented teachers, which reflects the principles of CAPS. Jerome shared why this is such an important topic to critically engage in:

You can have someone who can ace all of the assessments and do really well because they're really good at understanding the structure of the essay. I can understand this, I can read well, so, let me reproduce that for you. But, you know, I'm also homophobic, and I'm also racist, you know? And so, someone can pass all the tests and eventually stand in front of the classroom or counsel someone else, you know? I wouldn't like to live in a world like that. I can't really do anything about that, but I think part of what we do in the classroom has got to be also around not just the knowledge on one side, but

3 Pseudonym of one of the participants.

4 Pseudonym of one of the participants.

also personal transformation that happens in terms of how we think and how we see each other. (Jerome)

Jerome here reflects on the role of education, which links to discussions of how education can both reproduce inequalities and contribute towards a just and equal transformation (see e.g. Pedersen et al. 2022). If education is to contribute towards the latter, it requires reflection on an individual level, but also collectively in the classroom.

A third topic that was mentioned in the interviews was the “language policy in South Africa”, where Lindiwe⁵ discussed language inequalities in schools as an example of structural racism. Carolyn, who teaches language and literacy studies, discussed the “coloniality of language”, and how this impacts teaching in the classrooms. As she shared in the interview, although there are 12 constitutionally recognised languages, schools mainly teach through the medium of English or Afrikaans from fourth grade. Due to this discrepancy between educational policy⁶ and practice, Carolyn explained that “all teachers are therefore language teachers, even if they don’t recognise it”. To prepare the teacher students, she addresses the coloniality of language and exposes the power relations through unsettling “white privilege”:

What I want to do right from that first lecture onwards, is to try to reposition those students’ linguistic resources so that instead of them always feeling on the back foot with English, that over the period of this module, that they actually feel that they have the expertise, which is greater than the English speakers who don’t have African language. (Carolyn)

Carolyn described how, throughout her course, she models bilingual teaching, for example by letting the students ask their questions or give their comments in their preferred language. If it is not English, she asks someone else in the room to translate into English. This, Carolyn argued, is also a way of showing vulnerability as a teacher, that she does not know everything: “If I’m not prepared to take those risks, how can I expect the students to take those kinds of risks?” (Carolyn). Modelling vulnerability, an important concept in critical pedagogy, brings us to the next focus of the analysis, namely pedagogical approaches to critically examine structural racism.

Pedagogical Approaches and Methods: Discomfort and Love

In the cases shared by the teacher educators, there were numerous examples of critical pedagogical approaches, ranging from critical engagement with course materials, to creative assignments using technological tools, to radical pedagogical methods to

5 Pseudonym of one of the participants.

6 This is subject to change as the South African President Cyril Ramaphosa recently signed a new law, the BELA bill, to address the language policies by school governing bodies (Department of Basic Education South Africa [DBE] 2024).

display and disrupt power relations. A few selected examples are illustrated below and considered in light of transformative learning.

As reviewed above, a pedagogy of discomfort is an approach to teaching about structural inequalities and structural racism that teacher educators from UCT spoke about. Important here is the community of colleagues, where they could debrief and discuss methodological approaches. A pedagogy of discomfort was also prevalent in some of the other teachers' cases; however, some expressed concerns that learning should not be hurtful, and/or found it challenging to be in the space of discomfort with the students. David,⁷ for example, shared that he, to an extent, involves some level of discomfort through provoking critical debate, but expressed concerns, saying that "we are also teaching fragile minds, and to a certain level, fragility is not what they will accommodate", explaining that there are students as well as lecturers who do not want their "peace disturbed". As is expressed here, addressing content and applying methods that can be disruptive require attention to the sensitivities and risks involved.

One common method among the teacher educators was different types of "stimuli" to start discussions, including potentially uncomfortable discussions, for instance by using documentaries. For example, Carolyn uses the documentary *Sink or Swim* (PRAESA 2004) to start discussions on language inequalities and structural racism. The film shows a class of English- and isiXhosa-speaking primary-school learners, and the dynamics at play between the two languages as the medium of instruction:

When people see white children struggling, that is when they actually get it. ... and they realise, these are children we don't expect to struggle. They are affluent. They are English speakers and so on. (Carolyn)

This example highlights how "white privilege" is normalised through education (Sriprakash, Rudolph, and Gerrard 2022), and how the discomfort that surfaces when seeing this clip can invoke difficult, but necessary conversations about the mechanisms of structural racism linked to the medium of instruction privileging the minority of English first-language speakers. It also addresses the issue of allocation of comfort and discomfort among the students in a classroom, in terms of who is expected to do the extra work of learning in an unfamiliar language.

Another documentary that Natasha⁸ uses is *We Are Not Failures, We Are Being Failed* (Equal Education 2018), which follows a student in Cape Town investigating the toilet facilities at well-resourced versus under-resourced schools. As part of the coursework, Natasha gets the students to write individual critical reflective essays on difference, as well as doing group work, making a poster, and reflecting on a topic that they have dealt with in class. She reflected on this work,

⁷ Pseudonym of one of the participants.

⁸ Pseudonym of one of the participants.

It's so interesting that, when they write the reflective essay also, quite a few of them can't write an assignment that is not mostly academic. They're not able to reflect on their emotion, or the discomfort at all. But they give a very good summary of the reading and what the concept is, and so on. So, they have a very disruptive experience, I think, with this module, which is precisely to get them to think about how they, even if they're not doing anything in relation to social justice, they are still contributing to racism and sexism by doing nothing. So that's the point we try to get there. And they get there. (Natasha)

In this module, Natasha shared that a requirement is that the students engage in this sort of reflection, arguing that learning is emotional and involves risks and vulnerability (from teachers as well as students). They do not have to agree with perspectives that are discussed, but they must reflect, and every year, she explains “there is orientation to pushing back against this, because people have not been introduced to any of this ever” (Natasha). By “this”, she refers to the issues that a pedagogy of discomfort deals with—gaining a deeper understanding of the structural mechanisms of “race”, gender, and class, for example through problematising “white privilege” (DiAngelo 2019; McIntosh 1989). This experience connects back to David's comment that people do not want to engage in this kind of pedagogy as they do not want their “peace disturbed”. That is also why it can be argued that there is a need for a “pedagogy of discomfort”—to challenge the status quo by gaining deeper understanding of social issues.

Moving back to Imran's example on teaching about meritocracy, he uses what he calls a “pedagogy of noticing”, which is closely related to a pedagogy of discomfort:

I normally start with, so how many of you achieved really good grades at school? ... And people fall for it and the hands flash up. They're so proud of themselves and up they go. And the racialised nature of that is apparent. And as soon as they start to see that, I ask them so what are you noticing? ... And people are not afraid at the moment to begin to say, wow, all of us are a little bit fairer skinned. ...

And so, we talk about vertical power, horizontal power, later on. But I think those initial provocations of the class allow people to begin to look at the table that I then put up for them that says, in previous studies when we ask people about their success it's always personalised, it's individualised. I am the master of my success. (Imran)

This realisation of the mythical character of the concept of educational meritocracy and structural inequalities, as illustrated earlier as well, can be quite difficult. Imran referred to Cornel West, saying: “Education is brutal. You break people when you do good education”, and shared that one of the students had remarked: “I really enjoyed the course. But it's been very disturbing.” Using disruptive pedagogies therefore requires care for the students, as Imran shared, such as checking in with them during class, being available after class, as well as being open to the students about the agenda for the course. This example also illustrates the principle of “witnessing” and not “spectating” in a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler 1999) where students actively reflect on the experience to confront their assumptions and gain a deeper understanding. This kind of

engagement also has a transformative element, and as Imran emphasised, the reconstruction is crucial, a process that also involves the teacher, and which should aim to reconstruct better—with “a radical new way of looking at the world”:

And that’s what I try to do pedagogically. To say to them this is going to be hurtful. This is going to be things that you may not have heard before, if you haven’t gone through a good humanities education. (Imran)

The reflections on what is a “good humanities education” connect to Jerome’s thoughts on what is a good teacher, that it is not enough to be knowledgeable and skilled—learning must also be a humanising process, a perspective that connects with a “pedagogy of love” (Darder 2014).

Central to this kind of learning approach, and something that was prevalent in several of the interviews, is the occurrence of revelatory “a-ha moments” for the students, linked to particular activities, such as Imran’s example on noticing. According to Jerome, these are the biggest teaching moments,

for the students to come to particular realisations [seeing] the system, there’s a hegemony, there’s a status quo. We are internalising this. This means we behave and feel in a particular way about a thing. This contributes to the structural condition that keeps the whole thing going. (Jerome)

One such realisation, Lindiwe explained, is that inequalities are normalised, and students come to the realisation that “actually, I should not have been subjected to this”. These critical and often uncomfortable a-ha moments have the potential to surface structural mechanisms of inequalities, and how privileges and deprivations are internalised and reproduced, as shown also in Carolyn’s example of white privilege earlier.

In addition to providing revelatory insights, Sadi shared how such a-ha-moments are also transformative, and “should have a significance of a paradigm shift of increasing the lenses through which we view the world—and increasing the critique of the lenses as well”. To contribute towards these kinds of realisations, Sadi draws on the African philosophy of Ubuntu, and shared that in her work with the students, the process of conscientisation (Freire 2021) is important, working within the radical humanist paradigm, and modelling this to the students by being her authentic self. This perspective relates to Kathija’s approach of “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al. 1992), problematising Western hegemony in education:

[I]f you work with pedagogical approaches that only evoke the Western orientation to knowledge, then you’re going to have a lot of silence because that is not a lived experience. ... So, one of the things that I try to do in my classrooms is to integrate funds of knowledge, and find ways where my students, those who often are silenced because

their knowledge is not valued, become in some way all the other experts within that space. (Kathija)

These examples from the teacher educators clearly display elements from critical pedagogy through unpacking and critiquing structural inequalities and power dynamics. The transformative dimension is also evident, where the teacher educators do not consider teaching as simply a process of skilling but emphasise that it should be a humanising experience. This process involves students (and teachers) seeing the world through new lenses, on an individual as well as collective level. Injairu, for example, shared that she aims to create a “radical hospitable place” in the classroom, being human together through embodied learning, and seeing “Ubuntu as a liberatory practice—a struggle, not a utopia”. Here, a pedagogy of radical love can be seen as central through emphasising relational learning and the importance of feeling safe. As Injairu explains, “You can only learn if you feel safe.” Safe, here, was also in reference to being courageous, that “the work can be a dare” (Injairu). Part of the dare could be to open the space in the classroom to a pluriverse of learning and knowing. As noted above, other teacher educators were also concerned about the learning environment for the students, but as Carolyn expressed, the concept of “safe space” is problematic: “What is safe for me might not be safe for you, there is no ‘safe space’” (Carolyn). As discussed, the idea of a “safe space” is a central issue in a pedagogy of discomfort, where teachers have to manage whom the discomfort is directed towards in the classroom (Røthing 2019).

Sustainability and Transformation

During the interviews, the teacher educators were asked how their work relates to transformative learning and the ESD agenda. When this was brought up, Jerome, Natasha, and Carolyn each expressed that they find UNESCO’s work and the SDGs problematic. Natasha, for example, argued that “it has been co-opted” and explained that she always orients her work away from concepts that have already been co-opted by the mainstream, trying to do “counterwork” to address root causes of inequalities. Natasha’s critique links to Klees’s (2024, 1) analysis of the SDGs as “compensatory legitimisation”, “aimed at ameliorating some problematic conditions and thus restoring legitimacy to our social order”. Similarly, Jerome expressed that the idea of education as the driver of transformation needs to be problematised as education also reproduces inequality and given this role, he was not seeing any “real transformation happening within the capitalist frame”. He argued that global agencies are more about tweaking the systems to make improvements, instead of more radical transformation. Carolyn expressed similar concerns regarding education’s role in reproducing inequalities. She observed that she does not use the SDGs in her teaching and finds UNESCO’s work problematic: “They don’t want to acknowledge actually the biggest structural problems. You know, they want to just put it down to the individuals. And unfortunately, then you’re just blaming the victim, you know, which is really unfair” (Carolyn). This argument aligns with others’ critique of the SDGs and ESD, regarding its emphasis on individuals’ transformation rather than structural change (see e.g. Bylund 2024; Phuthi, and Griffiths, forthcoming)

Part of the issue here is what ESD should include to be able to contribute towards a more sustainable future, and what should be given emphasis in terms of content, pedagogies, and actions/solutions. These teacher educators reflect the critique of ESD mentioned in the introduction, highlighting its lack of focus on mechanisms of structural inequalities. Discussing this topic, Lausanne, having expertise in Environmental Education (EE) and ESD, argued, “Because the history of environmental education in South Africa was so situated in apartheid South Africa, and taking up a position against that. ... you can’t engage with any environmental discussion without looking at issues of justice”. This is an important perspective, and connects with current debates on “critical climate justice” (Sultana 2022) in the sense that if we are to address environmental issues, it must also include considerations of the mechanisms of structural inequalities and capitalism as a driver.

Also taking a critical stance on ESD and the SDGs, Injairu argued for a decolonial perspective on sustainability development:

How do we talk about sustainable development in a way that doesn’t ask us all to assimilate into this idea of what sustainability looks like, without taking a historical perspective of how we got there. So, it’s really the sustainable development work and the decolonial work in the same place.

Taking this perspective, Injairu advocates for transgressive work, preferring the term “regenerative futures” rather than sustainable development:

I’m trying to open up transgressive ways of being. And not as a rebel or as ... We desperately are in need of these other ways of being to breathe, because we are being siphoned out and the air taken out of our lungs by the market-driven forces and the structural stuff that reinforces the inequalities that are still present to date. ...

I think pedagogically, it needs to be viscerally clear, embodied, expressed, that we’re doing something different here. We’re crossing over. The SDGs say it’s time to cross over. Okay so let’s try to model what it means, to look like to cross over. (Injairu)

Injairu clearly expresses the argument that the sustainability agenda must address inequalities, which are reproduced through capitalism, and that this would involve radical change, also in terms of teaching and learning. This argument connects with other critical work that highlights the need for education to be informed by decolonial perspectives (Hutchinson et al. 2023) to address the nexus of capitalism and inequalities (Pedersen et al. 2022).

Conclusion

The analysis of the teacher educators’ responses demonstrates their understanding of critical pedagogy, sustainability and transformative learning, and the relational dynamics between students and teachers. Several of the examples emphasise that learning is emotional and that it can be a humanising process when the teacher educator

displays authenticity, vulnerability, compassion, and care through their engagement with the students—which links with the concept of a “pedagogy of love” (Darder 2014). Some level of disruption and discomfort was a central feature of several of the teacher educators’ pedagogical approaches, as a means to critically examine structural racism and other structural inequalities. A pedagogy of discomfort (Boler 1999) engages students and teachers by confronting established assumptions with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of structural inequalities. This is done by the teacher educators through stimuli such as videos, pedagogy of noticing, group discussions, and reflective essays. Shifting who feels “safe” in the classroom, or who experiences discomfort (including the teacher educator), is part of the disruptive work, on a cognitive and affective level. Although the students have their personal experience, the emphasis on the collective work was seen as important here and the activities surface the structural mechanisms of inequalities, as illustrated in the example that challenged the idea of meritocracy being practised or achieved in education. The participants in this study do not necessarily represent the typical teacher educator in South Africa, but these insights provide glimpses of possibilities for transformative practice.

The kind of counter-hegemonic work presented in the analysis may also be seen as a form of epistemic justice (Fricker 2007), where other narratives are given space. Relevant here is also the critical work on capitalism, addressing how racial capitalism has been and still is a driver of structural inequality in South Africa (and globally), and how it continues to affect the educational system (Clarno and Vally 2023; Vally 2022). According to several of the teacher educators, making students aware of these mechanisms often results in “a-ha-moments” where students gain insights that have been hidden for them previously. As participants noted, these realisations can be brutal for the students; however, they are also potentially transformative moments, with the capacity to facilitate students’ critical questioning of the structural mechanisms that we live within, and learn to “live with ambiguity, discomfort, and uncertainty” (Boler, 1999, 197). The possibility to engage critically is important not only for future teachers in South Africa, but also globally, particularly considering the banning and defunding of teaching and research related to “diversity, equality and inclusion” (DEI) by the Trump administration in the United States (Giroux 2025).

In terms of ESD and the SDGs, several teacher educators were very critical, for example critiquing UNESCO’s emphasis on individuals’ transformation instead of focusing on the need for structural change. One argument put forward was that the SDGs say it is time to “cross over”, calling for transformation, but do not push towards radical, structural change needed to achieve just and equal societies. From these participants’ perspective, if ESD is to contribute to a more sustainable future, it must address structural mechanisms of inequalities—something that the work on EE in South Africa may be an example of. This connects with Sund and Öhman’s (2014) argument that “power relations and issues of disagreement, both in the classroom and in the political arena, are essential for critical studies in ESE [Environmental and Sustainability Education]” (652).

Addressing power structures is also central in the ongoing decolonial debates in South Africa, and as one of the teacher educators expressed, there is a need to address the nexus of decoloniality and sustainable development, which would involve addressing structural racism. This argument is relevant beyond the borders of South Africa and relates to Sriprakash et al.'s. (2023) call for an education for “reparative futures”, focusing on “epistemic and dialogic conditions of reparation” (183). This approach connects with a pedagogy of discomfort, addressing both the historical inequalities and alternatives that can bring substantive resolution.

The interviews with the teacher educators display some ongoing hope in education's capacity to build competences that can break silences, invite a pluriverse of knowledges, and address structural mechanisms of inequality—of the past and present. Simultaneously, the teacher educators are highly aware of the huge inequalities within South Africa today, and in the global world, and the constant danger of education continuing to reproduce these inequalities. This can also explain their hesitation to use the term “transformative”, as South Africa has not transformed in the ways promised by the government since 1994. Despite this, by critically examining the mechanisms of inequality through counterwork, a pedagogy of discomfort, and a pedagogy of love, these teacher educators provide insight into concrete activities that can model how to challenge the status quo—and encourage future teachers to go to the classrooms with a social justice-oriented agency.

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