Reconceptualising Formative Assessment Through Ubuntu: Advancing a Humanising Curriculum for Pre-Service Teachers in South African Higher Education

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Abstract

The study writes a systematic literature review of research studies carried out from 2010 to 2025, concerned with the reformulation of formative assessment through Ubuntu and Ujamaa frameworks with focus on pre-service teacher education in South African higher education. Predominant assessment models tend to reflect individualistic, competitive paradigms, thus conflicting with indigenous African worldviews of interconnectedness and communal learning. Using Ubuntu, with special emphasis on human dignity, relationality, and empathy, and Ujamaa, with emphasis on collective responsibility and social justice, the review seeks to interrogate how the process of formative assessment can be reconfigured to promote a more humanizing and context-responsive curriculum. The findings show that African worldviews-based formative assessment practices stimulate deep engagement, affirm the identity of pre-service teachers, encourage reflective collaboration, and redress equity in historically marginalised educational settings. The study also claims to expose there are structural as well as epistemological problems, which include rigid curriculum structures, poorly trained educators, and policy-practice disconnects. It therefore recommends the integration of Afrocentric pedagogies and decolonial perspectives into assessment design for the formation of caring, critically conscious teachers. This review contributes to the discourse on educational transformation by advocating for formative assessment models that speak to African philosophies and thus to socially just teacher preparation.

Keywords: Ubuntu pedagogy, Ujamaa, formative assessment, humanising curriculum, pre-service teacher education

1. Introduction

Formative assessment has long been acknowledged as an invaluable pedagogical tool for improving and nurturing student learning in particular in teacher education programmes. It is germane to student-centred approaches that give primacy to learning as a process rather than fixed outcomes (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Dixson & Worrell, 2016). Still, dominant models of formative assessment tend to have Eurocentric epistemologies embedded in individualism, competition, and summative logic (Blignaut, Maistry & Letske-a, 2015). These frameworks in the South African higher education context remain misconstrued with the indigenous worldviews and cultural orientations of the majority of students, especially in historically disadvantaged institutions. The call for decolonisation of curriculum practices in South African higher education has raised the need for rethinking how assessment is conceptualised and enacted (Heleta, 2016; Angu, 2018). This includes interrogating whose knowledge gets valued, how knowledge is evaluated, and whether present modes of assessment bear upon transformation and inclusivity. Various authors have contended that the mainstream conception of assessment perpetuates epistemic injustice and alienation, most notably among pre-service teachers from rural and marginalised communities (Ajani, 2024; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Consequently, this discourse necessitates a shift in realization of assessment models into recognizing the cultural and socio-political contexts of the learners.

As an indigenous African philosophy emphasising the principles of relationality, empathy, and human dignity, Ubuntu presents a potent avenue for re-imagining assessment (Letseka, 2012; Waghid, 2018). Instead of pitting learners against each other, pedagogies informed by Ubuntu support communal learning, mutual care, and

responsibility. Complementing this African socialist ethic, Ujamaa draws attention to the importance of collective agency and social justice to the very real transformation that education can achieve (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Therefore, these conceptual frameworks provide a fertile ground for imagining formative assessment as a decolonial humanising process. The re-emerging research evidence points toward the potential of Ubuntu- and Ujamaa-based formative assessment to construct inclusive spaces for learning where reflective practice, student agency, and socio-emotional development are nurtured (Blignaut et al., 2015). For pre-service teachers, these approaches promote greater academic performance and begin to inform the development of their professional identity in ways that value ethical care, community engagement, and justice-oriented teaching-and this speaks directly to the transformative aspirations of teacher education in post-apartheid South Africa (Adonis & Silinda, 2021).

Yet, much remains to be done in elaborating and implementing elementary assessment frameworks of Ubuntu and Ujamaa in higher education venues. Much of the literature is less adjudicated in faulting ways that link Afrocentric philosophies to explicit pedagogical or assessment practices (Angu et al., 2020; Ramhurry, 2020). Moreover, institutional-level constraints relating to curricula rigidity, performance-based measurements, and policy-practice misalignment further block the integration of indigenous knowledge systems in the assessment landscape (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Sims et al., 2023). In making an effort to address these gaps, this study adopted a systematic review of literature methodology to assess how formative assessment may be reconceptualised through the lens of Ubuntu and Ujamaa in South African pre-service teacher education. The review is carried out covering the last fifteen years (2010–2025) and embodied theoretical, empirical, and practice-based studies questioning assessment, African philosophy, and curriculum transformation. Hence, attempting to bring about a fine-grained, evidence-based synthesis investigating ways in which these indigenous frameworks could inform assessment models deemed relevant to their context and just in their pedagogy.

The choice of pre-service teachers here is purposeful because, as future educators, their exposure to transformative assessment practices impacts not just their own learning but that of the cultural pedagogies which they shall bring into schools (Gopalakrishnan & Ganeshkumar, 2015; Beesley et al., 2018). Humanising formative assessment becomes more than just a feedback and growth tool; it becomes a wider educational practice that models care, social responsibility, and critical reflection. Thus, we see that the very task of rethinking assessment is inextricably bound up with nation-building and the realization of a socially just education. A further contribution of this study is to an emerging body of scholarship attempting to Africanise higher education pedagogy by putting indigenous values and knowledge systems at the forefront (Letseka, 2014; Angu, 2018). It reframes formative assessment not simply as a technical or procedural task but as a relational, cultural, and ethical practice. By engaging with Ubuntu and Ujamaa as theoretical and pedagogical frameworks, this study joins an ongoing conversation aimed at dismantling the colonial logics that still persist in South African education (Heleta, 2018; Hlatshwayo, 2020).

Conversely, the introduction basically charts the study's intentions, viz. to unpack, via systematic review, the possibilities of turning formative assessment into a humanising and Afrocentric practice that supports the development of critically conscious pre-service teachers. Through the bridging of philosophical, theoretical, and practical insights, this study seeks to provide practical options toward rethinking assessment as a tool for equity, belonging, and transformation.

2. Theoretical and Literature Review

For many years, formative assessment in institutions of higher learning has been created using Eurocentric paradigms, focusing on individual achievement, standardisation, and measure-based evaluation (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Dixson & Worrell, 2016). Such approaches tend to neglect the cultural and social milieus that imbue the learners' experiences in postcolonial African societies like South Africa. Scholars argue that dominant assessment practices maintain the status quo around inequality and further disadvantage historically African students by disregarding communal and relational epistemologies (Adonis & Silinda, 2021; Ajani, 2024). An opposite view considers assessment from a technocratic perspective and defers it to being a neutral means of tracking learning progress. Yet, this viewpoint merely masks the affective, ethical, and socio-political dimensions of learning so entrenched in African worldviews (Letseka, 2012; Waghid, 2018).

On the contrary, the indigenous paradigm has been left relatively unexplored and could provide an alternative conceptual grounding for the formative assessment system. The relational thinking in Ubuntu stresses compassion and communal responsibility, which interconnects learners and educators (Letseka, 2014; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). This viewpoint correlates with assessment as an ethical conversation with care, mutual respect, and an affirmation of human dignity. On the other hand, Ujamaa is considered African socialism practiced by Julius Nyerere. It promotes

the sole interests of welfare, equity, and solidarity; this would, in education, oppose neoliberal and individualist logic and promote assessment goals predicated upon shared responsibility and participatory engagement (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). These indigenous philosophies thus equip one with conceptual tools to envisage assessment activities as communal, culture-bound, and justice-oriented.

Empirical studies have begun illuminating the pedagogical potential of Ubuntu-centred formative assessment in fostering students' sense of belonging, engagement, and reflective learning (Beets & Le Grange, 2005; Beesley et al., 2018). These approaches therefore not only legitimise African knowledge systems but also form part of the decolonisation of curricula in teacher training programmes (Angu, 2018; Ramhurry, 2020). Yet, despite growing interest, theoretically utilitarian and practically oriented models still have to be adequately developed if Ubuntu and Ujamaa are to be practiced within formal assessment frameworks. Much research has indeed started to refer to these philosophies but fails to stipulate exactly how they could be put into practice in the day-to-day conception, enactment and evaluation of formative assessment (Angu et al., 2020; Blignaut, 2024).

Further structural aspects augment the resistance against integrating indigenous paradigms into mainstream assessment practices. There is nowadays very little room for flexibility within established curriculum structures, professional development for academic staff is absent, and prevailing policy frameworks continue to stress summative accountability above anything else (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Dison & Padayachee, 2022). This alienation between the stance that intends to uphold pedagogy and the institutional practice risks relegating the notions of Ubuntu and Ujamaa to mere rhetorical appellations, rather than concrete strategies for education. Therefore, if we want to achieve actual transformation, then the whole system must take part in restructuring assessment practices that are reflective of African epistemological values.

Increasingly, scholarship supports the need to embed learning that is affective and relational in the context of assessment. Research has shown that such assessment practices relieve anxiety, build self-efficacy and promote resilience among students, particularly those from socio-economically adverse backgrounds (Khursheed & Shahid, 2023; Weurlander et al., 2012; Mutinta, 2022). In the South African context, where pre-service teachers are impinged upon by structural as well as emotional constraints, the assessment programs based on Ubuntu and Ujamaa sync with broader global recommendations of humanising pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching (Widiastuti et al., 2020; Alaziby & Aldabbus, 2023).

Theoretically, Ubuntu and Ujamaa stand as counter-hegemonic paradigms that challenge the dominance of Eurocentric assessment norms. Ubuntu, often encapsulated in the phrase "I am because we are," posits relationality and interdependence as the foundation of human existence and, by extension, education (Letseka, 2012; Waghid, 2018). Within this framework, assessment becomes an affirming act of mutual recognition and co-agency, moving away from punitive and isolating practices. Ujamaa, by contrast, foregrounds collective wellbeing and justice, urging educators to address structural inequalities and empower marginalised learners (Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). Together, these frameworks recast formative assessment as a dialogical, community-rooted process committed to human dignity and social transformation.

In teacher education, the fertile ground nourished by the philosophies of Ubuntu and Ujamaa lays the pathway toward the establishment of inclusive, reflexive, and ethically grounded pedagogies. Pre-service teachers taught through the lens of these philosophies are more inclined to humanise assessment in a way that honours the socio-cultural realities of the learners (Gopalakrishnan & Ganeshkumar, 2015; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). These philosophies refute the false dichotomy of cognition versus emotion; they, in fact, posit that learning is a holistic, embodied procedure situated on the basis of social relations (Blignaut et al., 2015; Khursheed & Shahid, 2023). Hence, they serve as a powerful contrast to metric-driven assessment models that continue to isolate learning in South African higher education.

The growing body of building literature on decolonial education further foregrounds an urgency to embrace indigenous frameworks in the reimagining of assessment. Ubuntu and Ujamaa are not simply cultural artefacts but dynamic, living philosophies with the potential to reshape educational practice in profound ways (Angu et al., 2020; Letseka, 2014). Their integration into formative assessment is in line with the broader agenda of epistemic justice that seeks to dismantle hierarchies of knowledge and establish more equitable and culturally resonant forms of teaching and learning.

In sum, the literature affirms the theoretical and practical relevance of Ubuntu and Ujamaa as transformative frameworks for reconceptualising formative assessment in South African teacher education. With these philosophies presenting a rich and deeply culture-bound lens for imagining assessment not as some mechanistic activity but rather a relational, ethical, and socially responsive process, the efforts at realisation must be further deepened theoretically

as well as intentionally aligned with institutional and policy contexts in order to step outside of meaningless rhetoric and into actual educational transformation.

3. Method

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to explore how formative assessment may be reconceptualised through the Indigenous African philosophies of Ubuntu and Ujamaa within South African higher education, particularly in pre-service teacher education programmes. The approach followed the standards of transparency, rigour, and replicability as advocated by Dixon-Woods et al. (2006) and Furlong and Lester (2022), and was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. The review process proceeded through four key phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Comprehensive searches were conducted across multiple academic databases—namely Scopus, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ERIC, and ScienceDirect—using keywords such as "formative assessment," "Ubuntu pedagogy," "Ujamaa," "pre-service teachers," "decolonial assessment," and "South African higher education." The inclusion criteria required studies to (1) be published between 2010 and 2025, (2) focus on formative assessment in higher education, (3) be aligned with African philosophical paradigms, and (4) be set within or applicable to South African or comparable contexts.

Studies that were summative in nature, unrelated to African epistemologies, or lacking relevance to teacher education were excluded to maintain alignment with the research objectives. The initial search yielded 112 sources, of which 73 met the full inclusion criteria after rigorous screening. A total of 45 studies were deemed to offer substantial theoretical, empirical, or conceptual insight into the intersection between formative assessment and Indigenous African philosophies. A structured review matrix was created to document key details of each study, including author(s), publication year, methodological orientation, theoretical framework, target population, and major findings. This matrix served as the foundation for a thematic analysis, which was conducted inductively to trace philosophical convergences and pedagogical innovations emerging across the literature. The review process is summarised in the PRISMA flow diagram below:
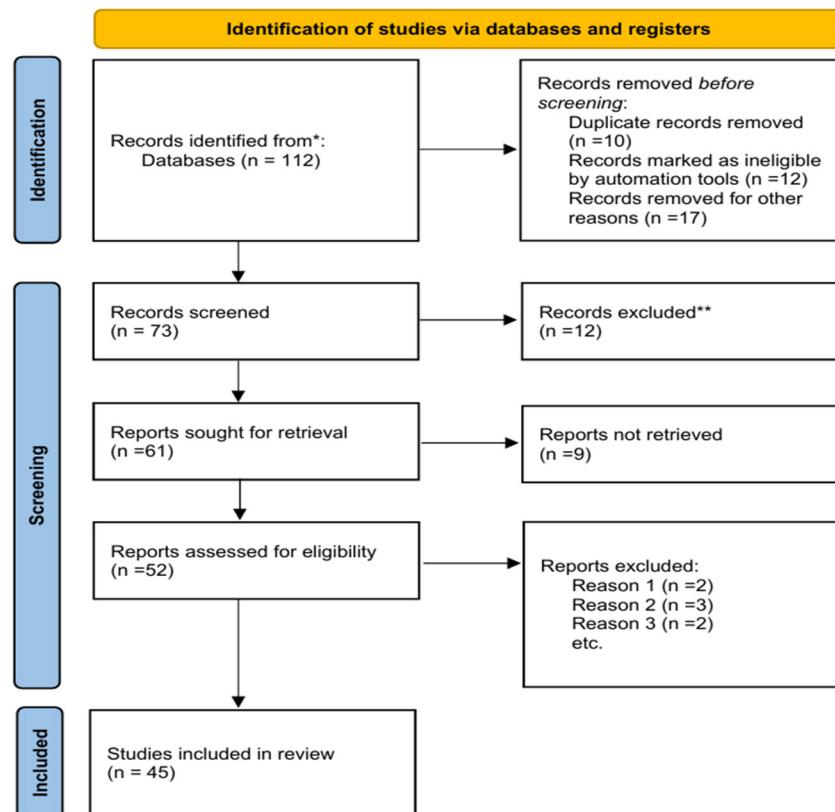

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram for Study Selection

The Figure 1 above outlines the number of sources identified, screened, assessed for eligibility, and finally included in the thematic synthesis. This visual representation underscores the transparency and rigour of the review process. The data analysis was framed by Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS), a qualitative synthesis approach that supports the development of new conceptual understandings while interrogating the assumptions, silences, and power structures embedded in reviewed texts (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). Thematic analysis deriving from Braun and Clarke's (2006) and following their six-phase model with open coding was implemented to identify repeated ideas and philosophical alignments. Such codes were then clustered into broader analytical categories and meta-themes, through iterative comparisons. The analysis was reflexive and interpretive, situated within the positionalities of the researchers as scholar-actors engaged in curriculum transformation within South African higher education. This insider perspective was instrumental in the cultural sensitivity of the analysis and in maintaining alignment with the humanistic ethos of Ubuntu and the collectivist justice ethos of Ujamaa (Letseka, 2014; Waghid, 2018). The five key themes that emerged from this inductive process were: (1) the disjuncture between Eurocentric and Afrocentric assessment logics, (2) formative assessment as a relational and ethical practice, (3) Ubuntu-informed models of reflective collaboration, (4) Ujamaa as a framework for collectivist justice in evaluation, and (5) institutional impediments to the implementation of indigenous assessment approaches. These themes were not pre-imposed but developed organically from the literature through constant comparison and abstraction. The Theme Mapping Table below illustrates the coding process and how analytical categories evolved into core themes:

Table 1. Theme Mapping Table: From Codes to Meta-Themes

Initial Codes	Analytical Categories	Emergent Themes
Eurocentric metrics, standardised rubrics, value-neutral feedback	Disciplinary norms vs cultural relevance	Disjuncture between Eurocentric and Afrocentric assessment logics
Dialogue, empathy, moral agency, communal feedback	Ethical engagement in assessment	Formative assessment as relational and ethical practice
Reflective journaling, community discourse, narrative co-construction	Reflective assessment practices	Ubuntu-informed models of reflective collaboration
Group marking, mutual accountability, learning cooperatives	Collectivist learning and shared evaluation	Ujamaa as a frame for collectivist justice in evaluation
Colonial legacies, policy inertia, educator resistance	Structural barriers to transformation	Institutional impediments to implementation of indigenous approaches

Trustworthiness was assured via triangulation of sources and insider consensus for thematic interpretation, in addition to the member checks of emergent insights. The study retained its credibility through a clear description of the inclusion and exclusion criteria and via a detailed audit trail mapping the entire review process in phases. Confirmability was attained through peer debriefing, with all sources used being publicly available and ethically approved. At the epistemic ethics level, Indigenous African philosophies were treated as legitimate knowledge systems and not just as anecdotal or supplementary narratives (Heleta, 2018; Angu, 2018). While SLRs carry some limitations-and-inherent to the use of already existing data-the methodology was chosen so as to allow for the construction of a theoretically grounded and culturally resonant critique of formative assessment in South African teacher education.

4. Results

The results of this systematic literature review are presented thematically to illustrate how formative assessment, when reconceptualised through the lenses of Ubuntu and Ujamaa, can advance a humanising curriculum in South African pre-service teacher education. Thematic analysis of the accessed literature resulted in 5 key themes, presented as findings of the study as follow:

4.1 Ubuntu-Related Conceptions of Assessment

One stream of literature legitimises shifting the very base of assessment from mechanistic to relational through the concept of Ubuntu. Where traditional Western assessment systems value standardisation, competition, and individual

merit, such values run contrary to Ubuntu since it promotes interconnectedness, shared humanity, and empathy (Letseka, 2012; Waghid, 2018). Within teacher education, this conceptualisation might be extremely important. Consequently, the assessment process within programmes that subscribe to Ubuntu would concern the cultivation of the whole person intellectually, socially, and morally, with assessment being a shared and reflective endeavour rather than an evaluative end (Blignaut et al., 2015). The Ubuntu-related conception of assessment recognises communal construction of knowledge; hence, pre-service teachers learn with and from one another in recognition of the collective nature of responsibility in the learning process (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). This stands in contrast to dominant Western epistemologies that place emphasis on measurable learning outcomes. From this perspective, learning from formative assessment is enriched through shared experiences and the empathy that connects such shared experiences.

The literature presents such conceptions as acts of resistance to a colonial epistemology that renders peripheral African ways of knowing. This way of assessing procures epistemological reclaiming with Ubuntu, humanising the learner and the assessor alike (Angu, 2018; Heleta, 2016). Hence, in this kind of assessment, the compliance aspect becomes secondary to meaningful growth while recognising students as situated beings with histories. In a way, it humanistically builds mutual respect and dignity between pre-service teachers and lecturers. In their view, Beets and Le Grange (2005) argue that these practices build feedback mechanisms that are culturally meaningful within which participants can develop a sense of belonging and trust in the process of feedback. Hence, the Ubuntu way of learning puts relationships at the heart of learning, paying attention to the emotional and relational aspects of learning that traditional assessment discourse ignores. Thus, within the broad rubric of educational transformation, especially in line with the post-apartheid ambitions of South Africa, Ubuntu-based assessment may be seen as both a reconstitution of assessment itself and as a contributor to moral and social formation of future teachers. By placing relationships at the centre, this approach fosters an ethic of care desperately needed in pre-service teacher education (Blignaut, 2024; Ajani, 2024).

4.2 Ujamaa and Communal Responsibility in Formative Assessment

Ujamaa, being an African brand of socialism, cherishes collective welfare, equality, and mutual assistance. Higher education literature increasingly highlights such values as crucial for remedying inherited injustices in South Africa's higher education system (Waghid, 2018; Letseka, 2014). Ujamaa, when contextualised to formative assessment, calls for an assessment process that views students as co-constructors of knowledge, cementing the professional value of solidarity and equal standing of the members of society. In an assessment born out of Ujamaa ideology, pre-service teachers are approached as active participants in attuning their own learning programmes instead of passively receiving feedback from someone (Dixson & Worrell, 2016; Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009). Such a participatory approach to assessment renders an enhanced voice in learning processes to enable learners to take ownership of their learning journey, while supporting that of others (Dixson & Worrell, 2016; Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009). Peer assessment in groupings, learning circles, and community feedback are formative practices reflecting such a cooperative spirit inherent in Ujamaa.

Moreover, this communal approach to assessment advocates for a just curriculum transformation especially in circumstances in which students coming from historically disadvantaged backgrounds continue to feel alienated and marginalised (Hlatshwayo, 2020; Adonis & Silinda, 2021). With Ujamaa-based assessment, the oppressive hierarchies are interrupted through a decentralisation of an educator's authority and recognising diverse knowledges and ways of being. On the continuum linking formative assessment and further social development, the literature stresses the importance of formative assessment for Ujamaa purposes, seeing teacher education not just as professional preparation, but rather as nation-building (Ajani, 2024; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Therefore, assessment stands as a civic duty, which in turn calls upon pre-service teachers to internalise values of justice, care, and the service of society. Instilling Ujamaa in assessment practices, therefore, demands a rethink of both institutional arrangements and ways of thinking amongst educators. Actual assessment frameworks still remain generally rigid and exclusive, though lip service is paid to social justice in current policies (Ramhurry, 2020; Sims et al., 2023). Applying Ujamaa entails more than curriculum change; it requires a systemic commitment to inclusive teaching and policy reforms that prioritise equity.

4.3 Reflective Practice and Critical Consciousness in Pre-Service Teacher Learning

A key observation in the literature is that assessment with the influence of Ubuntu and Ujamaa inhibits all kinds of reflective practices and fosters critical consciousness among pre-service teachers. As such, learners are urged to interrogate dominant narratives, review their own positionalities, and bring their learning to bear on social issues at large (Adiredja, Hartati, & Riyana, 2023; Guptan & Rasiah, 2016). Reflection here is not an act of mere rumination

but rather socially situated practice that facilitates the growth of ethical, altruistic educators. Reflective assessment techniques may include dialogic journal writing, group feedback sessions, and community-based learning evaluations. Such techniques heighten the awareness within learners about their responsibilities toward a society wrestling with inequalities and postcolonial legacies (Gopalakrishnan & Ganeshkumar, 2015; Beesley et al., 2018). They also provide learners with the tools necessary to cognitively confront and redress educational injustices once they enter their own future classrooms.

An Ubuntu assessment acknowledges the learner's voice and lived experience; equipping the levels of self-awareness and deep critical reflection. In contrast, most of the standard assessment approaches mute marginalized voices and basic outputs (Heleta, 2018; Kajee, 2019). Engaging in the intensive reflective processes emboldens the learners with their identities in consideration and enable them to construct instructional approaches based on equity and care. The literature suggests that the critical reflection underpinning formative assessment contributes to the development of metacognition, equipping student teachers to self-assess both the theoretical frameworks and practical applications of their instruction (Siegesmund, 2016; Dison & Padayachee, 2022). Being an ongoing process of both personal and mutual accountability fits well with Ubuntu. Hence, instead of simply delineating learning, a reflective form of assessment informed by indigenous African values engenders transformative praxis. It nurtures future teachers in forming a professional identity that is competent, critically aware, compassionate, and operationally responsive to-community (Letseka, 2014; Ajani, 2024).

4.4 Institutional Barriers and Structural Disjunctures

Despite the transformative possibilities of Ubuntu and Ujamaa, assessment mechanisms turn out to be systemic constraints within the higher education institutions impeding their realisation in full (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Sims et al., 2023). Systems of assessment and hence accounting treat their operations as comprising a fair amount of distortion and fraud with indigenous knowledges being sidelined in appraisal mechanisms. Disjunctural policies that counter educational realities exist within bureaucratic structures and are hardly flexible (Ramhurry, 2020). As a result, those instructors inclined to perceive and invest in humanising approaches rarely receive institutional backing or are left constrained by formal mechanisms that value compliance.

The other structural flaw remains insufficient professional development offer regarding Afrocentric pedagogies and assessment methodologies (Cheng, 2006; Blignaut, 2024). Sixty lecturers will not embrace any other methods of assessment than conventional ones due to lack of training despite being aware of inconsistencies that exist within them. This brings about a disjuncture between the practical everyday implementation of teacher education programs and the rhetoric of decolonisation. That dislocation is accentuated further by prohibitive levels in digital infrastructure and disparity-related issues, in particular for rural universities standing as an utmost concern for ensuring equal access to learning and assessment tools (Sikhwari et al., 2019; Mahlaba, 2020). Such disparities succeed in hampering the students from marginalized backgrounds unevenly and adversely affecting the efforts of encouraging inclusive and relational assessment practices. A solution for structural obstacles must come from top-down policy reforms and bottom-up pedagogical innovations. The institutions must foster enabling environments that affirm the context-sensitive, humanizing kinds of assessment practices. Without such systemic changes, the opportunity that Ubuntu and Ujamaa present for transforming formative assessment will remain utter rhetoric.

4.5 Toward a Humanising Curriculum and Sustainable Teacher Development

The conceptualisation of formative assessment from an Ubuntu and Ujamaa perspective greatly advances the agenda of a humanising curriculum in South African higher education. Such a curriculum is inclusive, relational, and just, actively resisting the hegemonic Western teaching paradigm (Angu, 2018; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Assessment is a relational practice associated with human dignity and potential rather than an instrument of control. The humanising curriculum elevates the role of formative assessment in teacher development with the focus on growth rather than judgment, feedback rather than failure, and collaboration rather than isolation (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Dixson & Worrell, 2016). This transition will nurture ethical educators with a social conscience, capable of working in an environment that is diverse and increasingly complex.

Sustainable teacher development is realized if the indigenous values are embedded into institutional culture and educational policies. Ubuntu and Ujamaa supply the philosophical quarry and anchors for the development of assessment systems that are sustainable, context-bound, and culturally respectful (Waghid, 2018; Letseka, 2014). This forms the foundation of not only academic development but also the emotional and social maturation of pre-service teachers. In addition, the research shows that humanizing assessment practices can positively influence student retention and performance and prepare students for careers (Adonis & Silinda, 2021; Vally Essa et al., 2023). It is expected that pre-service teachers will initiate a new wave of inclusion, reflection, and transformation in the

classroom as they graduate from these frameworks-they become an intervention multiplier. In the final analysis, the furthering of a humanising curriculum per Ubuntu-based assessment is not merely a theoretical discourse but a necessity. It is simultaneously a response to South Africa's more comprehensive social justice agenda and to the development of a corps of teachers able to restore faith, respect, and dignity in educational settings (Ajani, 2024; Blignaut et al., 2015).

5. Discussion

The findings of this systematic review affirm the transformative potential of repositioning formative assessment from the perspectives of Ubuntu and Ujamaa. These African philosophies of Ubuntu and Ujamaa, as opposed to dominant Eurocentric paradigms of assessment emphasising individual performance levels, competitiveness, and standardisation, function orientationally as relational, ethical, and collective modes of evaluation (Letseka, 2012; Blignaut et al., 2015; Waghid, 2018). The synthesis of reviewed literature makes it clear that such paradigms are not just culturally relatable to the majority of South African pre-service teachers but are in fact a necessary epistemological shift to parallel the decolonial call (Heleta, 2016; Angu, 2018). A central theme in the literature reviewed concerns the humanising role played by Ubuntu-informed assessment. Ubuntu, which recognises the dignity and worth of persons within a community, reimagines assessment as an act of relational care rather than punishment (Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Ajani, 2024). From such a standpoint, feedback is a dialogic and empathetic process aimed at growth and development. It recognises the socio-historical contexts of students and their lived realities, including the emotional dimension of learning, which are often dismissed in conventional assessment practices (Blignaut, 2024; Khursheed & Shahid, 2023). In this regard, Ubuntu represents a restorative ethic that aims to counteract the alienation experienced by marginalised learners in rigid academic settings (Hlatshwayo, 2020; Adonis & Silinda, 2021).

The review also confirms that Ujamaa provides a crucial socio-political ground for collective accountability and justice-oriented assessment. Ujamaa as an educational philosophy insists on the interconnection of learning with social responsibility (Waghid, 2018; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). It views assessment as a communal act, applying peer collaboration, shared reflection, and co-assessment acts as ways to build inclusive learning spaces. Ujamaa-inspired formative assessment thereby encourages pre-service teachers to co-construct evaluative criteria and participate in mutual feedback to nurture critical agency and egalitarian teaching relationships (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Siegesmund, 2016). This reconceptualisation challenges institutional conventions whose essence is performance-based corporate metrics. Reviewed studies report the existence of assessment policies in South African higher ed which remain rooted in summative, compliance-driven methodologies reflective of neoliberal logics antagonistic to communal learning (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Ramhurry, 2020; Sims et al., 2023). Thus, contradiction exists between policy rhetoric, which expresses transformation, and actual practices. Aggravating this unfortunate separation are institutional inertia, curriculum rigidity, and limitations in continuous professional development that would otherwise encourage embedding of Ubuntu and Ujamaa within assessment praxis (Dison & Padayachee, 2022; Cheng, 2006).

Yet another major insight is the fostering of reflective practice as an attribute of Ubuntu-based assessment. The literature consistently recognises formative assessment as an Akt of engendering critical consciousness, especially when applied within modes that are culturally responsive, dialogic, and experiential (Beesley et al., 2018; Adiredja et al., 2023). When pre-service teachers reflect on their positionalities, pedagogical beliefs, and social commitments, they will be able to teach diverse classrooms with empathy and justice (Letseka, 2014; Siegesmund, 2016). Reflection then becomes a political and ethical act-embodying Ubuntu and Ujamaa. Meanwhile, the findings suggest that relational and affective dimensions of assessment are particularly important for students in under-resourced and rural contexts. Many South African pre-service teachers experience structural inequities such as economic precarity, linguistic marginalisation, and institutional exclusion (Sikhwari et al., 2019; Mutinta, 2022). Formative assessment practices founded on the tenets of Ubuntu offer a scaffolded, empathetic way of affirming learner identities and alleviating academic anxiety. This, in turn, extends to existing literature on humanising pedagogies that cherish student learning in spite of the burdens, disparities, and rests upon human dignity (Vally Essa et al., 2023; Kajee, 2019).

Conversely, the reviewed literature also revealed that there exist epistemological tensions in their attempts to induct indigenous philosophies into formalised academic systems. While Ubuntu and Ujamaa provide fertile grounds for assessment transformation, their application remains under-theorised and inconsistently operationalised (Angu et al., 2020; Blignaut, 2024). There is an evident gap between rhetorical endorsement of these philosophies and their

practical embedding in assessment rubrics, institutional training programmes, and quality assurance mechanisms. This gap necessitates both critical theorisation and strategic capacity building across faculties of education. It is also necessary to critique the tokenistic usage of Afrocentric values within policy discourse. Several studies warn against the superficial inclusion of indigenous frameworks that lack critical engagement or result in epistemic dilution (Angu, 2018; Heleta, 2018). However, instead, the review pleads for a radical epistemological shift that foregrounds Ubuntu and Ujamaa as not merely cultural appendages but central generative logics from which assessment design, pedagogy, and institutional ethos emerge. This must simultaneously commit to curriculum justice, interrogating power relations imbricated in knowledge production and evaluation.

Crucially, the findings of this review denote the pre-service teachers as sites of transformation. As forthcoming educators, their exposure to formative assessment practices grounded in Ubuntu and Ujamaa has a multiplier effect on basic education. Such practices not only exemplify inclusive and reflexive teaching but also foster a professional disposition oriented toward justice, equity, and community development (Gopalakrishnan & Ganeshkumar, 2015; Ajani, 2024). Therefore, assessment transformation is longer confined to institutions of higher learning but permeates through educational ecosystems. Furthermore, the review establishes that humanising assessment promotes the sustainability of teacher development. In shifting away from mere evaluation toward accompaniment, from judgment toward support, formative assessment is ultimately a vehicle for nurturing the development of ethical and context-sensitive educators (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Dison & Padayachee, 2022). When institutional cultures favour this vision through enabling policy frameworks, as well as capable staff and student-centred curricula, transformative change becomes possible and sustainable.

A very important point is that while the article advances several compelling arguments for rethinking formative assessment on the basis of Afrocentric philosophical ideas of Ubuntu and Ujamaa, many challenges and limitations may apply to trying to implement these theoretical ideas in South African higher education. Major is the institutional propping up of Eurocentric models of assessment that still prevail in various guises: standardised testing regimes; summative forms of accountability; and choking curricular structures (Heleta, 2016/ Fataar, 2019). Therefore, the humanising assessment approaches anchored in relationality and collectivism may very well see sturdy resistance from policymakers, academics, and educationalists who are well ensconced within technocratic and performance-oriented paradigms. Moreover, the under-theorisation of practical models facilitating Ubuntu- and Ujamaa-informed assessment presents yet another barrier for the educator in his or her search for workable strategies. Professional development opportunities to guide lecturers in the actual doing of assessment in line with these philosophies are scarce (Ngubane & Makua, 2021), while, without mountain-wide institutional commitment, what shape the efforts might take would remain more a case of scattered attempts or tokenism. These limitations also mean that more context-sensitive strategies for implementation need to be developed that would anticipate resistance and enable a slow, steady transformation alongside policy realignment, capacitation of staff, and participatory curriculum reform.

Finally, the study contributes to burgeoning global discourses on decolonising education and localising pedagogical knowledge. It was in resonance with international calls for culturally responsive assessment practices that honour learners' backgrounds, epistemologies, and aspirations (Alaziby & Aldabbus, 2023; Widiastuti et al., 2020). However, the South African context, with its post-apartheid commitments, rural praxis, and racialised histories, demands a different approach. Ubuntu and Ujamaa therefore provide exactly such a contextualised framework for privileging relational, ethical, and communal values in assessment and pedagogy. Conversely, the issue of transforming formative assessment from the ideas of Ubuntu and Ujamaa is considered not only academic but moral. Hence the task at hand is a theory-practice gap need to be overcome, creating institutional preparedness, and rendering assessment a venue of hope, humanity, and healing.

6. Recommendations

Informed by the five inductively developed themes and sustained by a robust mass of empirical and conceptual literature, the study makes several targeted recommendations towards the reconceptualisation of formative assessment in South African higher education through the philosophies of Ubuntu and Ujamaa.

H education institutions are called to a critical reviewing and deconstructing of existing Eurocentric assessment models that promote individualism, competition, and cognitive detachment. The study has highlighted a clear disconnect between these dominant assessment logics and Afrocentric values (Ajani, 2024; Letseka, 2014). In other words, the marginalisation of learners who subscribe to cultural and epistemological orientations underpinned by collectivism, relationality, and moral agency. Hence, assessment procedures should be reorganised to recognise

diverse ontological standpoints that highlight interconnectedness and learning in groups (Waghid, 2018; Angu, 2018; Murris, 2016).

Moreso, formative assessment should be seen and fulfilled as a relational and ethical undertaking that is based on dialogic feedback, empathetic engagement, respect for human dignity, and human rights. As seen in the study of the literature, pedagogical care, moral obligation, and the well-being of students have been stressed by Sibanda and Blignaut (2020) and Makhasane and Chikoko (2016). Thus, in a sense, the formative process must move away from the mechanistic allocation of grades and rubrics and towards practices that affirm the voice of the student and nurture his or her personal identity, cultural identity, and academic identity. A humanising way of viewing the Ubuntu ethic foresees assessment as a pathway shared by all parties rather than a point of adjudication (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013).

Therefore, it is recommended that reflective collaboration, guided by the philosophy of Ubuntu, be embedded into teacher education curricula. Empirical studies in the review (e.g., Khumalo, 2020; Ngubane & Makua, 2021) attest to the efficacy of community learning strategies such as peer review, collective feedback systems, and narrative assessment. These approaches promote metacognitive awareness and connect strongly with African oral traditions and intergenerational modes of learning. Curriculum designers and developer of academic staff thus need to carve out safespaces for collaborative reflection as a mode of assessment, especially within pre-service teacher training.

Conversely, Ujamaa should also be operationalised in institutional policies as an orientation towards collectivist justice in evaluation. Assessment policy stands to be reimagined so as to encourage the sharing of responsibility, group accomplishment, and fair pedagogic outcomes. The literature dissected (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Heleta, 2016) speaks unequivocally about disrupting Western neoliberalism in higher education that exalts individual achievement beyond community upliftment. By fostering mutual accountability and reciprocal success indicators, assessment transformations steered by Ujamaa would redress the issue, as currently, they alienate students who were traditionally disadvantaged.

Conclusively, institutional impediments to the appropriation of indigenous methods need to be conscientiously dealt with: this includes resistance on epistemic grounds, lack of policy support, and inadequate training of staff. These and other structural factors that remain impediments to reconstruction are prominent in various studies in the literature (Badat, 2010; Heleta, 2018; Fataar, 2019). Therefore, institutions must set in motion capacity-building initiatives to raise educators' consciousness of African philosophies of education and review the existing outdated assessment policies, complemented by the formation of interdisciplinary forums dedicated to assessment. By doing so, they shall honour indigenous ways of knowing and work alongside the broader agenda of decolonising the curriculum. Hence, these recommendations are not just theoretical imperatives; instead, their planets of empirical need and philosophical commitments were revealed by the systematic review of literature. Their goal is to realign formative assessment on a basis of dignity, solidarity, and justice toward an inclusive higher educational system in South Africa.

7. Conclusion

This study has shown that reconceptualising formative assessment in South African pre-service teacher education through the Afrocentric philosophies of Ubuntu and Ujamaa provides a compelling, transformative alternative to the prevailing Eurocentric paradigms. Through a systematic review of fifteen years of the literature, what emerged from the research was an understanding that formative assessment grounded in relationality, empathy, shared responsibility, and participatory justice will more fully support the convergence of the lived experiences, cultural identity, and ethical sensibilities of South African students. However, while such a vista opens possibilities of the theoretical and pedagogical kind, the institutional and structural barriers exist aplenty-from deeply entrenched summative practices to professional development and policy non-alignment. It was argued that a genuine shift towards the decolonial humanising assessment practice had to find itself incorporated deliberately within assessment frameworks and institutional cultures, pedagogical training, and curricular policies. Without such systemic change, the promise of Ubuntu and Ujamaa would remain largely aspirational. Hence, future research, policy reform, and academic development initiatives must engage with the co-construction of ethically grounded, contextually relevant assessment models for socially just and inclusive teacher education.

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Informed consent

Not Applicable.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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