



Embedding acceptance and commitment therapy in postgraduate psychology education: A South African action research study

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Abstract: This study explored how psychology educators in South Africa can be professionally developed to embed Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) principles into their pedagogy, thereby enhancing psychological flexibility among postgraduate students. Using a Collaborative Action Research approach, seven educators and thirteen students participated in a ten-month intervention comprising four iterative cycles of training, implementation, and reflection. The thematic analysis found that ACT-informed pedagogy not only promoted student resilience, present-moment awareness (mindfulness), and values-based engagement (authenticity) but also catalysed shifts in educator identity toward more reflexive teaching. Students cultivated resilience by learning to tolerate emotional discomfort and sustain values-driven action, while developing mindfulness through present-moment awareness that fostered engagement. This process also nurtured authenticity, as students aligned their academic and professional identities with personally meaningful values, paralleled by educators' growing reflexivity and relational openness, signalling a values-informed pedagogy. These findings provide a theoretically grounded, contextually responsive model for cultivating soft skills in higher education, affirming the potential of ACT as a scalable, culturally congruent framework for professional development.

Keywords: Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT); collaborative action research (CAR); higher education pedagogy; mindfulness-based interventions; postgraduate psychology education; psychological flexibility; soft skills development

Introduction

Psychological flexibility, the core outcome of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), refers to the ability to remain mindful and act in line with one's values even amid distress, underpins resilience, adaptability and well-being (Geda et al., 2021; Van Lill & Van Lill, 2022). As a meta-competency, psychological flexibility and ACT equip students to tolerate ambiguity, recover from setbacks and pursue meaningful goals (Hayes et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2018). Despite its importance, postgraduate psychology education in South Africa continues to prioritise cognitive and technical competencies while offering little support for emotional endurance or personal agency (Ebersöhn, 2019; Potts & Le Hunte, 2024). Moreover, practical models for integrating ACT into postgraduate curricula remain limited (Harris, 2009; Nixon et al., 2025; Van Lill & Van Lill, 2022). The result is a pedagogy that prepares students for knowledge work but leaves them vulnerable to the complexities of human interaction in terms of service delivery (Mason & Nel, 2015; Molete, 2023). To address this pedagogical gap, this article reports on a Collaborative Action Research (CAR) study that explored how educators can be professionally developed to embed ACT principles into their teaching practices.

Although research highlights the relevance of ACT in complex learning and professional environments, postgraduate training in South Africa still lacks structured pedagogical strategies that intentionally cultivate it. Existing programmes prioritise technical expertise while overlooking the emotional and adaptive competencies needed in real-world psychological service delivery. This

gap underscores the need for an empirically grounded pedagogical model for integrating ACT principles into postgraduate teaching.

Psychology, mental health, and higher education

Globally, there is growing consensus that soft skills, such as adaptability, emotional regulation and perseverance, are foundational to professional effectiveness, particularly in human service professions (Coovadia et al., 2009; Potts & Le Hunte, 2024; Van Wyk et al., 2022). Psychological flexibility encapsulates many of these competencies (Hayes et al., 2013). Embedding the development of such competencies within curricula, rather than relegating them to stand-alone modules, enables scalable, sustainable approaches to producing emotionally literate graduates equipped to navigate the complexities of South Africa's mental health sector.

ACT promotes psychological flexibility via processes such as acceptance, cognitive defusion, present-moment awareness, self-as-context, values clarification and committed action (Harris, 2009; Hayes et al., 2011). Originally a clinical intervention, it has been applied to educational settings to support emotional insight, value-driven engagement and resilience. Its emphasis on contextual awareness and collective meaning-making resonates with African pedagogical paradigms that prioritise relationality and situated knowledge (Council on Higher Education, 2017; Geda et al., 2021). Research on systematically embedding ACT within higher education, particularly in Africa, remains limited, highlighting the need for empirical exploration (Branquinho et al., 2020).



Educators are central agents of pedagogical change; however, many lack structured support to translate psychological constructs such as psychological flexibility into practice (Halpern, 2010). Collaborative Action Research offers a participatory framework for professional development, enabling educators to plan, act, reflect and refine their teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Aligning CAR with ACT principles allows educators to evolve personally and pedagogically, embedding emotional competencies into their teaching. However, CAR remains underutilised in higher education, especially as a vehicle for soft-skills pedagogy (Branquinho et al., 2020).

The South African context

South Africa's mental health sector is critically under-resourced and fragmented. Approximately 75% of people with mental health conditions receive no treatment (Malakoane et al., 2020; South African Human Rights Commission, 2019). Graduates from psychology programmes are expected to deliver frontline mental health support, often without adequate preparation. While postgraduate programmes emphasise technical proficiencies, they tend to overlook the emotional and adaptive capacities required for real-world psychological service delivery (Molete, 2023).

In South Africa's fragile and unequal healthcare system, postgraduate psychology graduates frequently enter emotionally charged professional spaces without the psychological tools required to navigate ambiguity, distress, and systemic adversity (Harvey, 2023; Hassem et al., 2024). Many of these graduates, often unregistered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa, assume frontline roles in mental health as lay counsellors, community workers, and educators (Hassem et al., 2024; Molete, 2023). The chronic underfunding of mental healthcare (Malakoane et al., 2020), combined with the burden of untreated psychological distress across the population, renders these roles particularly demanding (South African Human Rights Council (SAHRC), 2019).

This disjuncture between qualification and professional responsibility underscores an urgent imperative to prepare honours-level psychology students, amongst others, not only with technical expertise, but also with psychological capacities that enable them to endure, adapt and act with resilience under conditions of stress and uncertainty (Ebersöhn, 2019; Mason & Nel, 2015). In the South African context, honours students are postgraduate students enrolled in a one-year specialised degree that follows the completion of a bachelor's degree. An honours degree serves as a bridge from undergraduate to advanced professional or academic training.

The goal of the study

This study aimed to develop and evaluate a pedagogical model that integrates ACT principles into postgraduate psychology education. Specifically, the study examined how a collaborative action research process could support educator professional development, strengthen resilience and psychological flexibility among students, and generate practical classroom strategies for embedding ACT into

teaching. The guiding research question was: How can educators be professionally developed to embed ACT principles into their teaching practices to enhance psychological flexibility in psychology honours students?

Method

Research design

Through a CAR methodology, we engaged educators as co-researchers to identify teaching challenges, trial ACT-informed strategies and reflect on outcomes. This reflexive and participatory approach modelled psychological flexibility within the research process itself and allowed pedagogical interventions to be tailored to context (Malorni et al., 2022). ACT principles were embedded into both the methodological and educational frameworks so that psychological flexibility was not only an outcome but also a stance within the research.

Participants and setting

The study was conducted within a postgraduate honours psychology programme at a private South African university. The sample included seven psychology educators and thirteen honours-level students. This small, context-specific sample aligns with CAR's emphasis on depth, relational inquiry, and the co-construction of pedagogical change (Branquinho et al., 2020). Educators engaged in professional development workshops and reflective cycles, while students offered feedback on ACT-informed classroom experiences. Detailed demographic data were not collected, reflecting the study's focus on relational, practice-based inquiry (Malorni et al., 2022).

Demographic variables were intentionally excluded because the methodological priority of CAR is relational inquiry rather than demographic comparison. The decision aimed to maintain a focus on collaborative meaning-making rather than individual categorisation. However, we acknowledge that demographic information can illuminate power dynamics; therefore, future studies should incorporate optional demographic reporting to examine potential interactions between identity markers and pedagogical experiences.

Data collection

Data were collected across four CAR cycles, each comprising planning, action, observation, and reflection. Multiple qualitative methods captured both the process and impact of embedding ACT into teaching:

- Facilitated workshops introduced ACT principles and supported the development of pedagogical strategies.
- Reflective journalling allowed educators to document evolving thoughts, emotional responses, and classroom practices.
- Classroom observations enabled the researcher to examine how ACT was operationalised.
- Feedback sessions offered space for educators to reflect and refine strategies collaboratively.

The collaborative nature of the research was supported through iterative reflection cycles involving both educators and students. After the initial workshops, educators met to

reflect on how to integrate ACT principles into their teaching. Reflections were recorded, transcribed, and analysed in groups, then applied in classrooms.

Students contributed through guided group discussions and individual interviews, which informed pedagogical adjustments. The recursive, dialogical approach embodied by CAR emphasised collective inquiry, generating a layered dataset on pedagogical transformation, educator identity, and ACT-influenced learning (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Ethics

The study received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa (UNISA) (Ref. No.: PERC-16084). Participants were provided with detailed information sheets outlining the study's purpose, processes, and expectations. Written informed consent was obtained.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

Data were analysed thematically using Terry et al.'s (2017) six-phase approach: familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Thematic development followed an inductive process rooted in reflective dialogue and collaborative analysis. Codes were drawn from reflective journals, group discussions, and feedback sessions, then organised into conceptual themes aligned with ACT's core processes of psychological flexibility. Analysis was interwoven with the CAR cycles, generating both pedagogical adjustments and deeper conceptual insights.

The following example illustrates this analytic progression. During initial coding, several excerpts captured moments where students described naming and acknowledging their anxiety during classroom activities. These excerpts were consolidated under the code "recognising anxiety in the learning process." As analysis deepened, this code was grouped with related segments, such as students experimenting with grounding techniques or pausing to notice complex thoughts, forming the broader category "emergent coping practices in the classroom." This category, in turn, contributed to the overarching theme, "Cultivating psychological flexibility in students," which describes how ACT-informed pedagogical practices supported students in applying acceptance- and awareness-based strategies within authentic learning moments.

All final themes were established through triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness was supported through:

- Triangulation across data sources (journals, observations, workshop outputs).
- Participant review of preliminary themes to ensure interpretive resonance.
- Peer debriefing with a qualitative research colleague.
- An audit trail documenting analytic decisions and reflexive notes.

Findings and discussion

The findings are presented in three interrelated themes: (1) Cultivating psychological flexibility in students, (2) Shifts in educator identity and reflexivity, and (3) Pedagogical

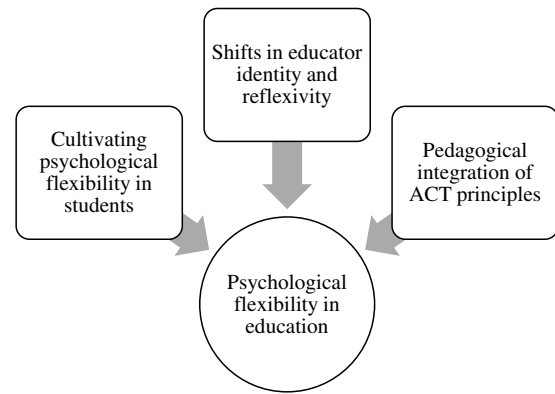


Figure 1. Thematic map: Psychological flexibility as a core pedagogical orientation

integration of ACT principles. The themes are discussed and synthesised under the heading "Expanding Pedagogical Possibilities through Psychological Flexibility."

Collectively, these themes point to a dual process of transformation: Students developed greater emotional resilience, values-aligned engagement, and a stronger sense of professional identity, while educators underwent a parallel shift toward relational authenticity, psychological flexibility, and pedagogical intentionality. Figure 1 below offers a visual map of these thematic domains and their interconnections, with psychological flexibility at the core of both student development and pedagogical practice.

Cultivating psychological flexibility in students

From the students' perspective, ACT-informed activities facilitated a shift toward emotional openness and values-based action. From the educators' perspective, these changes were observed through students' engagement and reflections.

Across the CAR cycles, educators observed a notable shift in students' ability to engage with emotional discomfort, ambiguity, and value-driven decision-making. These changes followed ACT-informed interventions that emphasised acceptance, present-moment awareness, and values clarification (Hayes et al., 2013). Students increasingly reported an ability to identify and tolerate internal distress without avoidance. One student shared, "I've stopped trying to control every anxious moment. I am learning to sit with it and keep going." Another reflected, "When things got overwhelming, it helped to remind myself why I chose this field. Reconnecting with that gave me energy." The student's willingness to "sit with" anxiety rather than suppress it illustrates ACT's acceptance process, while continued engagement signals committed action. Such experiential openness is central to ACT-based growth, especially in high-pressure academic settings (Zhang et al., 2018).

Mindfulness practices and values-mapping exercises emerged as pivotal, anchoring students' academic efforts in intrinsic goals rather than external validation. This was particularly meaningful in light of the high-performance anxiety traditionally reported among postgraduate students (Chi et al., 2023). One educator observed, "There was a tangible shift. Students were no longer asking just 'What

must I do?’ but rather ‘What kind of psychologist do I want to become?’ Echoing this transformation, a student shared, “I stopped chasing marks and started thinking about the type of person I want to be. That changed how I approached everything.”

The alignment between educator observation and student experience signals a pedagogical inflexion point, from performance-oriented compliance to values-based identity formation. Such shifts reflect a deepening engagement with ACT’s processes of values clarification and committed action (Hayes et al., 2011). As students began to orient their learning around personal meaning, their engagement became more purposeful. In response, educators increasingly employed reflective prompts, values-based inquiry, and open dialogue to honour students’ internal motivations. These strategies helped bridge course content with students’ emerging professional identities, promoting not only deeper engagement but also ethical awareness and learner autonomy.

Within ACT, this alignment with personal values contributes to long-term psychological well-being, particularly during times of emotional or contextual strain (Zhang et al., 2018). In postgraduate education, such shifts reflect the development of meta-competencies, including agency, reflexivity, and ethical attunement (Potts & Le Hunte, 2024).

Shifts in educator identity and reflexivity

Initially, most educators approached teaching from a content-focused standpoint. Through structured reflection and peer feedback, they began repositioning themselves as facilitators of emotional growth and values-based learning. This evolution aligns with the ACT process of self-as-context, whereby individuals step back from fixed identities to act in values-aligned ways, even in the face of discomfort (Hayes et al., 2013).

Educators’ journals reflected growing comfort with pedagogical vulnerability. One educator mused, “I used to think emotional disclosure was unprofessional. Now I see that modelling authenticity helps students bring their full selves into the room.” Another shared, “I have become more comfortable in my skin and embraced the idea of authenticity . . . in private practice, you’re authentic, but it’s done in a more guarded way.”

These insights mark a shift from guarded professionalism to purposeful authenticity. Within an ACT framework, such movement illustrates psychological flexibility, where vulnerability serves as a relational tool for modelling openness. By normalising emotional transparency, educators cultivated psychologically safe learning spaces, which are critical for student development (Nixon et al., 2025).

Educators’ transformation was gradual, emerging across CAR cycles as they integrated ACT processes, such as defusion, acceptance, and relational openness, into their teaching. One educator explained, “I express resilience through the way I handle class discussions that are very difficult,” highlighting flexibility in real-time pedagogical challenges. Another reflected, “My journey parallels my students’ journeys. . . keeping this in mind has increased my empathy and patience.”

Students echoed this evolving ethos, as one student noted, “Before, I was just doing what was required to get through. Now, I ask myself what kind of practitioner I want to be . . . that question changes how I learn.” Another shared, “When things got overwhelming, it helped to remind myself why I chose this field. Reconnecting with that gave me energy.”

These reflections illustrate ACT’s values clarification process, as students began to anchor their learning in personal meaning rather than external expectations. Similar to educators, students demonstrated an emerging capacity for values-based engagement, a key pillar of psychological flexibility.

Pedagogical integration of ACT principles

The integration of ACT principles into teaching was not implemented through fixed curriculum modules, but rather through an evolving pedagogical stance. This adaptive stance allowed educators to experiment with context-specific interventions, such as initiating grounding rituals before assessments or modelling cognitive defusion techniques to address student anxiety. These practices fostered psychological safety in the classroom, enabling students to view emotional discomfort as a natural part of growth, rather than a barrier to performance.

This approach reflects advocacy for mindfulness-based teaching as a means of promoting emotional development (Nixon et al., 2025; Van Lill & Van Lill, 2022). Moreover, it supports Harris’s (2009) argument that ACT is flexible enough to be embedded across various domains of professional practice. In this regard, one educator reflected on how this flexibility allowed her to “meet students where they are, without abandoning structure or academic rigour.” Another described a moment of spontaneous adaptation, noting, “When we plan things, we can anticipate challenges. . . but in this case, the class dynamic was something we did not consider. I got side-tracked from the development plan to a new plan of creating a safe place for development in the class.”

The shift from structured delivery to relational responsiveness illustrates ACT’s emphasis on contextual sensitivity and psychological flexibility. As another educator explained, “Being flexible and willing allows me to accommodate for the unexpected that may come up. . . and deal with this effectively.” These quotes encapsulate the ACT processes of willingness and committed action, showing how educators’ real-time decisions were guided not by fixed scripts but by deeply held values.

Expanding pedagogical possibilities through psychological flexibility

The three themes articulate a decisive shift in postgraduate psychology education, repositioning both learners and educators within a pedagogical model anchored in psychological flexibility. Rather than offering technical instruction alone, the CAR process enabled a dynamic transformation of educational practice, allowing ACT principles to reshape how learning, identity, and emotion intersect in the classroom.

At the student level, ACT-informed pedagogy cultivated emotional resilience, values-directed engagement,

and a stronger sense of professional identity. Students' movement from performance anxiety to purpose-driven inquiry underscores the potential of psychological flexibility to foster not only academic persistence but also ethical intentionality. The ability to "sit with" discomfort, pursue meaningful goals, and integrate values into decision-making reflects ACT's therapeutic principles repurposed as developmental tools for higher education.

Educators, too, underwent a parallel evolution. Through cycles of reflexive inquiry, they reconceptualised their roles, embracing emotional transparency and relational authenticity. This shift from content transmission to emotionally attuned facilitation reflects the ACT process of self-as-context and highlights the emotional labour involved in meaningful teaching. As their capacity for pedagogical vulnerability expanded, so too did their ability to model psychological flexibility for students.

Importantly, this transformation was not imposed through a curricular overhaul, but rather emerged through the subtle, context-sensitive integration of ACT principles. Grounding exercises, reflective writing, and values exploration became not just tools, but expressions of a broader teaching philosophy rooted in acceptance, presence, and committed action. The South African context, with its social inequities, systemic adversity, and emotionally taxing educational environments, further underscores the relevance of ACT as a culturally responsive and pedagogically transformative framework.

Implications for practice

This study offers key implications for postgraduate psychology education in South Africa. Integrating ACT principles into teaching showed that psychological flexibility can be cultivated both pedagogically and clinically. As a meta-competency, it supports resilience, ethical clarity, and sustained engagement in demanding professional contexts (Van Lill & Van Lill, 2022; Zhang et al., 2018).

For educators, the CAR process fostered reflexive, emotionally literate, and context-sensitive teaching. Through iterative reflection, educators shifted from content delivery to relational facilitation, modelling the very flexibility they sought to instil (Branquinho et al., 2020). This underscores the value of professional development grounded in authenticity and affective labour.

Moreover, ACT's focus on values, presence, and meaning-making aligns with African pedagogical traditions that prioritise relationality and communal care (Council on Higher Education, 2017). Its integration required no major curricular overhaul, suggesting it is both scalable and adaptable across varied higher education settings.

Internationally, innovations in higher education, such as AI-assisted teaching, underscore the need for pedagogical frameworks that balance technical skill with reflective and ethical engagement (Medina, 2025). Similar to these emerging models, integrating ACT requires educators to adopt critical, collaborative, and psychologically attuned teaching orientations. Positioning ACT alongside global movements toward relational, humanising pedagogy strengthens the international relevance of this study and

highlights its potential transferability beyond the South African context.

Limitations of the study and further research directions

While this study offers valuable insights into ACT-informed pedagogy and educator development, several limitations must be noted. Conducted within a single postgraduate psychology programme at a South African institution, the purposive sampling and context-specific focus enabled a rich and situated understanding. However, the sampling strategy also limits the transferability of the emergent qualitative insights. Future research should test similar interventions across varied faculties, institutions, and regions to assess their broader applicability.

The omission of detailed demographic data, albeit consistent with CAR's relational ethos, also limits transferability and constrains analysis of power dynamics that may have influenced participation. In a context shaped by race, class, and professional hierarchies, such omissions may obscure important layers of meaning. Future studies could address this by integrating optional demographic reporting and reflexively attending to positionality.

The study captured short-term shifts in educator identity and student resilience but did not include longitudinal follow-up. Future research could explore sustained impacts through post-programme interviews or classroom observation. Finally, while student reflections informed the development of themes, the analytic lens remained educator-centric. More direct student involvement in data interpretation would strengthen participatory validity and support more democratic knowledge production.

Conclusion

The primary contribution of this study is to demonstrate that psychological flexibility can function not only as a learning outcome but also as a pedagogical orientation that reshapes teaching identity, classroom climate, and student engagement. By integrating ACT principles into a CAR framework, the study offers a scalable, culturally responsive model for postgraduate psychology education in resource-constrained contexts. This positions ACT-informed pedagogy as an innovative contribution to global debates on relational and resilience-based teaching. Through a CAR process, educators reimaged their professional identities, students reported greater emotional regulation and values-driven learning, and ACT principles were seamlessly integrated into pedagogical practice.

The findings demonstrated that psychological flexibility is not only teachable but also transformative when embedded through context-sensitive, relational pedagogy. Educators emerged as reflective facilitators who modelled authenticity, while students became more grounded in their professional purpose. These shifts suggest that ACT offers a culturally resonant and scalable framework for building human capacity in resource-constrained systems.

This study proposes that preparing students for clinical complexity requires more than technical skills; it demands pedagogical approaches that foster resilience from within. In doing so, we respond not just to academic needs but to the psychological realities of South Africa's educational and mental health landscapes.

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Availability of Data and Materials: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Lauren Martin, upon reasonable request.

Ethics Approval: The study received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa (UNISA) (Ref. No.: PERC-16084). Participants were provided with detailed information sheets outlining the study's purpose, processes, and expectations. Written informed consent was obtained.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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