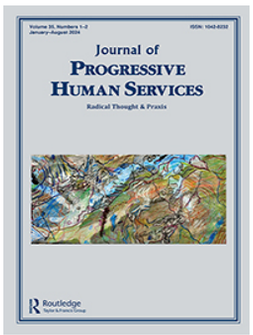

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African Knowledge Production Incubators: Approaching Indigenous and Decolonized Social Work from the Ground Up Through Stories of Our Lived Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Six social work academics from five universities in South Africa embarked on an African Knowledge Production Incubators project using PALAR methodology. We acknowledged the imperative to decolonise social work curricula in South African universities with the goal of centering African knowledges. This article reports on our project's first objective viz. telling stories of our lived experiences of being an African. Our stories reflected the richness in the traditions and rituals we inherited from our ancestral and local knowledge holders and wisdom bearers. The key learnings translated into guidelines for the extended incubation and the decolonization of the social work curriculum.

KEYWORDS

African knowledge production incubators; decolonizing; decolonization; decoloniality; indigenous knowledge

Introduction and context

Curriculum transformation in the social work undergraduate qualification in South Africa is informed by the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2015) standards, underpinned by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. In addition, the social development approach replaced the colonial and apartheid welfare approaches (RSA, 1997) prioritizing human rights, social wellbeing, participation and democracy. However, most social work supervisors in organizations delivering social services in communities received their training in the years prior to the implementation of the social development approach and so have most social work academics thus far. Perumal (2017) argues that academics as well as practitioners have inadvertently persisted in teaching and rendering

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services from apartheid era approaches that they are familiar with. The ripple effects of this are felt in the communities as well as by students who are placed in organizations for practice learning, which perpetuates the coloniality of knowledge, coloniality of power and the coloniality of being. As social work academics, we could no longer be bystanders and observe from the sidelines (Boler & Zembylas, 2003) the perpetuation of coloniality in our curriculum. Hence, we embarked on this African Knowledge Production Incubators project with the goal of understanding the experiences of academics in respect of indigenizing social work theory, skills, and practice within the South African context.

Social work is a profession situated at the forefront of social wellbeing. Therefore, understanding that social workers are tasked with the responsibility of being agents of social change, facilitating social development, social cohesion, empowerment, and liberation of all people by upholding social justice and expelling oppression (Sewpaul, 2013) gives credence to the urgency for decolonizing the curriculum. Western social work tradition dictates a focus on the intrapersonal well-being of clients, upholding confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity and negating African values such as a holistic approach to life, which incorporates a symbiotic existence of humans-nature-supernatural and the environment (Thabede, 2008).

A collective existence and experience is significant to Africans, where individuals are linked to extended family and communities (Osei-Hwedie, 2007), which according to Wilson (2008) is also synonymous with relational epistemology. Wilson (2008) avers that our ways of knowing as Africans and as indigenous people are based on the network of relationships we maintain with our families, communities, and the environment that we live in. As authors and participants in this PALAR study, we believe relationality is at the core of our work as African social workers and academics. The importance of the environment in our network of relationships is also due to the fact that African societies are replete with cultural knowledge, skills, and expertise that are deeply ingrained in indigenous cultures and everyday lived experiences. As a result, our societies for decades have developed their own sets of lived experiences and explanations pertaining to the environments they live in (Kimwaga, 2010).

In light of the aforementioned background, the aim of this article is to share our first incubation aligned to the project's first objective viz. telling stories of our lived experiences of being an African.

Literature review

Historically and currently, the creation and production of knowledge in African studies and curriculum covered in many universities have remained the claimed privilege of the West. Thus, inherent Western thought has been imposed on African societies (Oyewumi, 1997). Decolonizing educational spaces including the curriculum has been a global challenge that has affected

all countries in Africa (Ratele, 2017). In the context of South African higher education, the call for decolonization of education and curriculum was championed by two major student protests movements 2015–2016 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall (Harms-Smith & Nathane, 2018). To align with the objective of this paper, the literature reviewed focuses mainly on conceptualizing colonialism, different dimensions of coloniality, decolonization, and decolonial strategies in higher education.

Colonialism and coloniality

Nyoni (2019) asserts that the conquest of Africa has had some devastating effects, and this meant the demolition of indigenous, political, education, and economic systems in Africa. Maldonado-Torres (2010) summarizes the relationship between colonialism and coloniality by stating that colonialism is survived by coloniality. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2009) describes colonialism as having tried to control the memory of the colonized, and in this regard, attempts were undertaken to make the colonized see themselves through the hegemonic memory of the colonizing center. On the other hand, Maldonado-Torres (2010) defines coloniality as a long-standing pattern of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, and that defines culture, labor, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013:488) perceives coloniality as "an invisible power structure, an epochal condition, and epistemological design, which lies at the center of the present Euro-North American-centric modern world." South Africa continues to experience these harsh effects of coloniality. With political freedom achieved only in 1994, after hundreds of years of domination and oppression, the epistemic effects of coloniality continues to occupy a significant place in the lives of African people.

Different dimensions of coloniality

Grosfoguel's (2007) three-pronged model of coloniality identifies: coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being as key constructs that maintain colonialism. In respect of coloniality of knowledge, authors contend that an interrogation of critical epistemological questions such as who generates the knowledge that is consumed and for what reasons, is essential (Mamdani, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Perumal, 2017). Questions along those lines demand additional layers of academic scrutiny into the politics of knowledge creation, the relevance of the knowledge produced as well as how such knowledge enhances or diminishes the value of communities (Seroto, 2018). It is argued that in the social work qualification in higher education institutions,

decoloniality refers to bringing African knowledge, informed by indigenous culture and tradition to the center of existence (ASASWEI, 2017).

It is also significant to note that social work is associated with rendering services to historically disadvantaged and marginalized communities, where confidence and spirit is low and a mind-set of helplessness pervades. When clients are poor, their contribution to knowledge is minimized, they are treated as incapable and tend to hide their capacities, even from themselves (Bar-On, 2003, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Thabede, 2008). In addition, the social worker with his Euro American centric social work degree, holds substantial power over marginalized communities by the mere fact that he possesses an education. That education unknowingly perpetuates colonial and apartheid hangovers (Mashau, 2018).

Decolonisation and decoloniality

The devastating effects of colonialism, coloniality, and apartheid characterize Africans in the South African context. The relationship between decolonization and decoloniality is as essential as the relationship between colonialism and coloniality, as indicated in the previous section. Nyoni (2019) describes decolonization as the disruptive endeavor to end colonialism. Decoloniality denotes the ways of thinking, knowing, being and doing that began with but also precede the colonial enterprise and invasion (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Decoloniality necessarily follows, derives from, and responds to coloniality and ongoing colonial process and condition. It therefore aims at deconstructing the epistemic practice as a sub□jectivity that is privileged by the current capitalist socioeconomic systems and the liberal socio-political order in its practice of coloniality.

Snyman (2015, p. 268) asserts that the decolonial turn helps in asking questions about the "effect of colonisation in modern subjectivities and forms of life." The call to decolonize university programs, intellectual landscapes, and infrastructures has become the norm (Seroto, 2018). For instance, Fataar (2018, p. vi) argues that "Mobilising on the basis of their demand for free education, students across the South African university sector expressed the need for change in university knowledge and curricula . . . ." Tembo (2022) concurs that there is sufficient literature calling for the decolonization, through the decolonial turn, not only of university curricula but also of the processes of knowledge production making the African Knowledge production Incubators project relevant in social work knowledge production as it intends to build knowledge from the ground up. Different strategies for decolonization of higher education have been proposed and are discussed next.

Decolonial strategies in higher education

Zavala (2016) identifies three major methodologies or strategies applicable in decolonial education projects, namely counter/storytelling, healing, and reclaiming. It is worth indicating that, while each strategy is defined based on its particular practice, they are not mutually exclusive.

For instance, counter/storytelling involves the practices of naming and remembering, healing involves two major practices – social/collective and spiritual/psychological healing, and reclaiming encompasses practices, identities, and spaces.

Counter/storytelling

According to Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986), storytelling is retelling a tale or narrative to one or more listeners through voices and gestures. In terms of counter/storytelling, decolonial education comes into being as people engage in dialog and reflection. While storytelling is viewed as inherent in the African context, there is a view that these stories are often told in a manner that advances the harmful and stereotypical narratives about African reality. It is also essential to note how Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) describes the value of language as having power beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. In this regard, language is viewed as either an instrument for domination or for empowerment, and not as a neutral phenomenon. It is worth noting the perpetual dominance of English and the lack of co-existence of indigenous languages in educational spaces. This is said, with due recognition of higher education policy provision to promote multilingualism, whose implementation is yet to be realized. Smith (2018) describes the past, the stories local and global, the present, the communities, cultures, languages, and social practices as often spaces of marginalization, and also spaces of resistance and hope. In this regard, on the negative side the stories are told in a manner that marginalizes the agency of the indigenous people, whereas on the positive side, the stories reflect the communal participatory experiences. Since storytelling is an age-old tradition among indigenous cultures (Zavala, 2016), the marginalization of African languages is a central problem for decolonial work. Therefore, in this project, we began by telling our own stories using our vernacular to describe and share the core concepts of our experiences of being African.

Healing

Snyman (2015) attests that the continuing after effects of colonialism sink into our bodies, into our emotional responses, into a more basic interpretation of the world and ourselves. Zavala (2016) regards healing as the second decolonial methodology that is often overlooked but necessary because colonialism "deculturalizes and separates colonised peoples from who they are, their communities, languages, practices and land" (Zavala, 2016, p. 4) In this regard,

healing is divided into social/collective healing and spiritual/psychological healing. Social collective healing enables community self-determination as well as acknowledgment and space for inclusion of spiritual practices and ceremonies. Psychological healing foregrounds colonized peoples' experiences of historical trauma, enabling a reconnectedness with community and all life forces around them such as the spirit and mother earth.

Reclaiming

Thirdly, the reclaiming strategy in decolonial education encompasses practices, identities and spaces. Zavala (2016, p. 5) describes it as a strategy that involves "recovering who people are (their cultural identities), their practices, and their relation to place (land, cosmos)." This generative praxis is found relevant in this project as it explains our endeavor to co-create the knowledge through acknowledging the ancestral knowledges, local knowledges, and spiritual connectedness in the development of decolonial spaces.

Theoretical framework

This article is underpinned by both Indigenous Wholistic Theory and Afrocentricity. Absolon (2010) purports that Indigenous Wholistic Theory is embedded in our learnings from the entire Creation, starting with the earth (land), wind, sky, sun, water; recognizing the interconnectedness and reciprocal relationship between human and natures elements. Central to the indigenous theory is the humility of man who is part of the creation and has a continual reliance on a Higher power and the gifts of nature.

Drawing on the four directional circle, Absolon (2010) suggests that it systematically moves around each direction, beginning in the east where a discussion of Spirit and Vision occurs. In the south, a discussion of relationships, community, and heart emerge. The western direction brings forth a discussion of the spirit of the ancestors and importance of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous knowledge production. The northern direction articulates ideas surrounding healing and movements and actions that guide practice. The author emphasizes that all four directions connect at the center where the fire is located. The Indigenous Wholistic theory argues that connecting to our history allows us to restore our identity – this means tapping into our wealth of knowledge that was created by our ancestors; connecting to the vision that they had for us and keeping this alive through specific rituals like sharing dreams; dance rituals; and relearning daily protocols through which we cultivate peace and harmony in our relationships (Absolon, 2010). The Indigenous Wholistic Theory fits in with our approach in this contribution, based on its acknowledgment of time and space, among other things. For us the dimensions of time and space are significant considering our acknowledgment of the connection of the past, present and future, our lived

experiences and aspirations, and the acknowledgment of the connection with and the role played by the departed in paving way for our current knowledge. As we put it: "... it is their shoulders that lift us to greater heights yet strengthen our roots at the same time."

The second theory that underpins this study is Afrocentricity, which is defined as a concept that places the African way of life at the center of any analysis that involves knowledge production, research, and even ways of writing about African people. The proponents of Afrocentrism (Asante, 1987, 1999; Schiele, 2000; Thabede, 2008) are critical of the Eurocentric social science theory, intervention paradigms and knowledge base that universalizes the Eurocentric culture and undermines the cultural values of Africans. The premier work of Thabede (2008) articulates some significant elements of the Afrocentric perspective and locates these in the helping profession in general and social work practice in particular. In the main, Thabede (2008, p. 236) argues that the point of departure for the Afrocentric perspectives is asking the question: "Does the research, knowledge production or intervention place Africans in the centre? Is it in the best interest of African peoples?"

This Afrocentric perspective in this article, serves to explain the advancement of the ethos and the values of the majority. Firstly, to view Afrocentric perspectives as a significant part of the knowledge base and practice alongside current Eurocentric intervention theories and practices that are widely used in society. Secondly, the need for the helping professions and social sciences in South Africa to create space for the subjugated, marginalized African culture-based epistemologies.

Decolonization of institutions like universities will begin the process of a much broader transformation in society because universities represent a microcosm of society (Le Grange, 2016). Universities are in societies and about society and it is important to teach a curriculum that displaces Western ways of thinking, being and feeling, and to replace them with relevant to African cultural experiences (Thabede, 2008).

Research methodology

Our overall project goal is to understand the experiences of academics in respect of indigenizing social work theory, skills, and practice within the South African context. In order to do this in a decolonial way, we use the Participatory Action Learning Action (PALAR) research design which is situated within the qualitative research approach (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). These methods are synonymous with democratic approaches that intend to bring about change in social order, by enabling all the participants a voice in shaping the outcomes (Lesley, 2020; Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). Therefore, as researchers, we became participants in this study. PALAR develops continuous action learning where

critical reflection and learning takes place among the action learning set at each meeting with the aim of transforming praxis (Wood, 2015). Converging as a core team of six academics from five universities in South Africa to form a primary incubator is how we designed the data collection for this project.

The term *incubators* refers to a safe, academic space created for developing and nurturing thoughts and ideas on what constitutes African knowledge. It is a space where African knowledge is brought to the fore by the core research team. During incubation, we purposefully retreated cognitively from familiar routines, interactions, and power relations to question and rethink established sources of knowledge (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). It is necessary to do this because critical consciousness requires a personal awareness of the political, social, and economic contradictions which is most crucial for personal cognitive liberation (Freire, 1970).

During our first incubation, the six researchers/participants met over three days involving a cyclical process of sharing, learning, reflecting, and taking action. The first co-constructed objective of our study was to: *tell stories of our lived experiences of being an African*, with the corresponding research prompt: *what was it like growing up as an African child?* The reference to African child in this context is by no means to suggest that all Africans have one cultural belief system (Gwekwerere, 2016). Rather it is about our real-life experiences growing up guided by values rooted in the general way the indigenous people of the African continent made sense of the social and physical milieu (Gwekwerere, 2016).

While in this study researcher-/participants come from different ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds in South Africa, we seem to share similar upbringing experiences. More so, African child in the context of this study is loosely referring to people growing up from cultural belief systems outside the worldview of Western culture. We therefore contend that in the context of this study, people from non-Western cultural belief systems have different views and life experiences including cultural belief systems from those of their Western counterparts; and that they struggle to reconcile their preconceived ideas and cultural beliefs with the Western approaches presented to them at universities (Yishak & Gumbo, 2012).

Each of us, during the first incubation, shared our collective lived experiences, retreated, reflected, re-convened and co-constructed what it means to decolonize and indigenize social work curriculum from the ground.

Ethical clearance was obtained from all our institutions, with the primary project being housed at Nelson Mandela University, South Africa. While the appropriate ethical considerations such as upholding human dignity, respect for persons, justice, and beneficence as suggested by Wood (2015, p. 67) were considered in line with participatory research like PALAR.

Findings and discussion

Data was generated through individual reflections and focus group discussions during the first incubation in June 2021. Using Braun and Clarke steps of data analysis, three key themes were co-created and are discussed next. Before we go into the themes, the authors of this paper briefly introduce themselves.

Self-location is essential in indigenous research as it affords researchers an opportunity to be aware of their own preconceived knowledge, experiences, and cultural identity (Kovach, 2009). Strega cited by Kovach (2009) posits that the perspectives of the oppressed are often missing in knowledge formation, it is therefore the responsibility of those in a position to influence an academic discourse by sharing and voicing their stories. Kovach (2009) asks the question 'If we do not, who will? This aligns with the sentiments of Ndlovu Gatsheni and Freire that no person can shape a decoloniality agenda better than the oppressed. Thus, "self-locating is a powerful tool for increasing awareness of power differentials in society and for taking action to further social justice" (Kovach, 2009, p. 110). Hence, a need to locate ourselves as authors in this paper by reflecting on our lived experiences as Africans on African soil. Kovach argues that self-location is a necessary shift from the objective positivist paradigm. It affords researchers a holistic narrative which reveals how the self influences research choices and interpretations. Moreover, critical reflective self-location gives an opportunity to examine research motives (Kovach, 2009).

Who we are and our positionality

I am ***Nevashnee Perumal***, a third generation South African of South Indian indenture origin, I lost my mother tongue together with much of my heritage due to my parents wishing for a better life for us. During apartheid in all social and institutional spaces, I was made to believe that aspiring to emulate White people was a goal. Due to a sheltered upbringing, only in my adult years did I realize the chronic injustices that Black people in South Africa face. Currently, as a lecturer, I am aware of my power to change how I was raised. Therefore, I choose to engage in critical actions that enable those whose language is threatened and whose histories are given little importance to occupy the stage which produces and enacts knowledge.

I am ***Thanduxolo Nomngcoyiya***, a son of oXhamela clan but raised by maternal and paternal grandmothers under Madiba and amaNdungwane clans. As an African child, I had a very difficult childhood as both my biological parents had to spend most of their time working under the difficult laws of apartheid and colonial regimes that had no regard for Black lives and Black families in particular. These regimes denied our forebears and our parents' formal education by

various racialized laws and in our time while we have access to education but the current status quo of education and curriculum in our institutions still entrenches their hegemony through the use of their language, value systems, and their way of life. This is a reason I have taken the challenge and become an advocate for an education system that embraces indigenous knowledge education rooted in our ways of doing and our ways of life.

I am ***Motlalepula Nathane***, I was born in Kropperskraal farm in the Vaal formerly known as the Transvaal. I am a descendant of farm tenant laborers, both my paternal and maternal grandparents were people without *amakhaya* homes/land as they migrated from farm to farm Transvaal. I grew up in a peri-urban Township called Evaton Townships in South Africa. From a very early age I have always had a sense that I lived in an unjust society and an unfair social order that needed to be resisted. The resistance was role modeled to me by African women in my Township, they defied the Native Beer Act of 1908 which made it illegal for women to brew traditional beer. This resistance became my lived reality from the age of 11 years when my Township was militarized during the civic political uprising that led to the Apartheid imposed state of emergency in Townships

I am ***Veonna Goliath***, a Khoisan descendent, however I was never introduced to this identity as a child. The one I was raised as and with which I still closely identify is that of a Coloured South African. Growing up in a neighborhood that came about as a result of forced removals by the Apartheid government in South Africa, I was sensitized to a community narrative of a people that are on the periphery as second grade citizens. It is these experiences that account for my strong commitment to challenge injustices and work toward reclaiming what my predecessors have been robbed of. The appreciation for the Creation, a Higher power and the gift of all forms of life has been part of my DNA for as long as I can remember.

I am ***Mbongeni Sithole***, an African child born of a mine worker. My father spent more time selling his labor as one of the few underground catch operators. In this regard, he was entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring that the underground mine workers were safely driven from the surface to the underground and back. While the family mainly resided in a rural homestead, we also frequented properties in the mining village and the township. While these three contexts shaped my identity and social consciousness, it is the experience in the mining setting that posed the initial exposure and consciousness about the exploitation of workers under the capitalist system. In this regard, there was no way that one could be oblivious about the conditions experienced by the disadvantaged persons and communities.

Ni NwaNgobeni (Priscalia Khosa), was raised by my great grandmother in rural Limpopo while my mother was working as a domestic worker in Johannesburg. I was the first in my family to go to university. Not because

those who came before me did not wish to pursue higher education, they did, but were not afforded an opportunity to do so due to circumstances beyond their control. I remember one afternoon sitting with my grandmother on the stoep of her hut and her telling me that, had she been able to go to school she would have been a teacher. As a black woman growing under apartheid, she was denied an opportunity to go to school. It was those words that inspired me to be in academia and be a representation and voice not only of her desired dream but hope for those who come after me.

Theme 1: Why we came together

As Black academics in higher education institutions, we are confronted by multiple questions regarding who owns and creates knowledge. We intentionally use Black in accordance with Steve Biko's definition. According to Epstein (2018, p. 97), Biko describes Blacks as "those who by law or tradition are politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identify themselves as a unit in struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations." Being Black is not a matter of pigmentation but reflects a mental attitude and emancipation toward dismantling notions that view blacks as lesser beings. Hence, as Black academics we want to transform social work education and make it what we wish to see in the curriculum to reflect the reality of most black people in South Africa. We thus seek to disrupt the norm of current knowledge systems in higher education by sharing our collective lived experiences and co-construct what it means to decolonize and indigenize social work curriculum from the ground. This disruption can be described in line with Mignolo (2009) concept of epistemic disobedience. This is the need to delink from the illusion of zero point of epistemology which is described by Mignolo as the ultimate grounding of knowledge which basically universalizes knowledge. Mignolo (2009) introduces the idea of "situated knowledges" and the view that all knowledges are situated and every knowledge is constructed (Mignolo, 2009). Therefore, by co-constructing and indigenizing social work curriculum, the authors of this paper are contributing to the process of pluriversalizing knowledge.

However, we often ponder about what is our contribution to knowledge, how do we make our voices heard in academia, how do we involve students and communities in our teaching and research practices? It is our common interest on these questions that connected us and brought us together to endeavor in the journey of answering the posed questions by creating a decolonial community of practice. Consonant with the reminder by Grosfoguel (2007) of the coloniality of power, we further acknowledge the power we possess as educators and power differentials. Hence, we adopted an approach to dismantle the power differentials and the individualistic thinking by embracing the communal values among us as we embark on this journey of

learning, unlearning, relearning and co-constructing knowledge in social work education through the African Knowledge production incubators project.

The African knowledge production incubators project aims to provide a hub of warmth where African knowledge could be incubated through the sharing of our lived experiences; our own ways of knowing and doing, from as far back into childhood as we could remember. Our sharing was invariably grounded in the knowledges that we each brought from our own cultures. The purpose of our sharing was to reconnect to our indigenous knowledges and experiences. This process coheres with what Seroto (2018) describes as epistemological diversity as one strategy in decolonial projects, through which repressed and latent knowledge is recovered and one's view and way of being is transformed. One colleague summarized it as follows:

> My suggestion would be that we tell the stories of our lived experiences of being raised as an African child that shaped our being. I don't know, maybe that's making it too long. But it's giving the context you know, so it's because this is what our stories have been about. We were telling these stories of what these lived experiences were, we were dating them from our childhood, and how that has shaped us into who we are, you know, why we believe what we believe.

Zavala (2016) describes this process of storytelling as a methodological strategy in decolonial projects which affords the opportunity to name and remember the past. Absolon (2010, p. 74) asserts that at the heart of indigenous theory is acknowledgment of past, present, and future. In doing so, we are able to access knowledge systems from our ancestors, which helps us to decolonize limiting, stereotypical views we hold of the self and indigenous people, and in the process directly activate healing processes, drawing our learnings from natural teachers and community parents – a decolonial strategy Zavala (2016) termed healing and reclaiming. Similarly, Chawane (2016) who writes about the development of Afrocentricity argues that blacks need to place themselves at the center of their own history, as this will not only enhance a sense of agency but also counteracts the marginalization of their political and economic experiences. Afrocentricity foregrounds the culture and achievement of Africans, and celebrates our beliefs and values. The articulation by one of the colleagues resonates with these views:

> . . . we are our ancestors . . . we are actually really moulded by them. Whatever that you see today, everybody might be celebrating, but we need to celebrate those really that came before us.

We acknowledge that it might not be easy to reflect on our own biases in terms of epistemology which shapes the way we think, write, teach, conduct research and connect with others. According to Schurink et al. (2011), dependability of qualitative research is to establish whether the research process is logical, well documented, and audited. Although the research process has been extensively described in the methodology section, we explain what we did in the first

incubation in the next theme for further data dependability and verification. Bless et al. (2013) assert that when researchers describe exactly how the data was collected, coded, and analyzed, and can present good examples to illustrate the process, the results can be dependable.

Theme 2: What we did

Figure 1 below depicts the graphic of a tree which illustrates both the process and the content of our engagement during the first incubation. The fruit on the right-hand side of the tree documents the activities we undertook as a team, whilst the fruit on the left depicts the themes of the stories that were shared during the incubation. Guided by relational epistemology (Wilson, 2008), the trunk of the tree illustrates where we located the bonding of the team. The locality furthermore validates humans as central but not superior to other forms of life (Thabede, 2008).

The bonding in the team characterized the cohesion that occurs in African spaces. To bond as a team, we participated in multiple activities with the intention of co-creating and co-generating knowledge. It is also important to note that in this participatory co-creation there is a realization that we are each bringing our knowledge system into that space and there was no one elevated individual who was perceived as an expert. In us coming together, there was

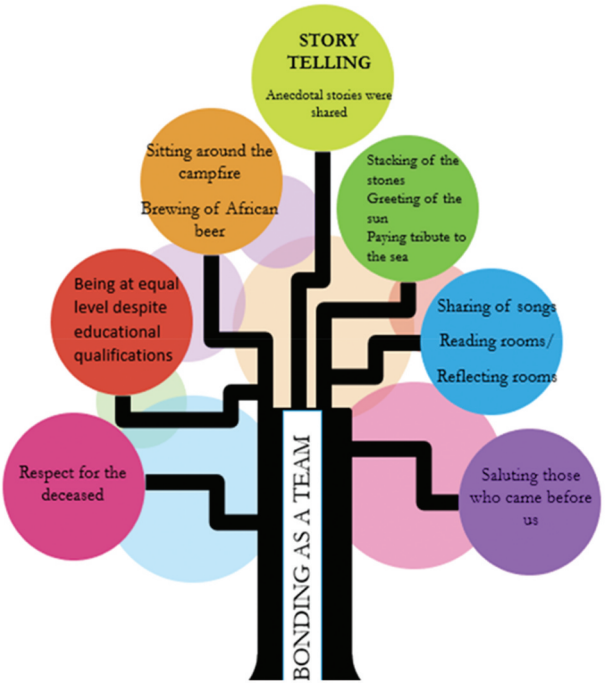

Figure 1. First incubation process and content.

Figure 2. African Knowledge production Incubators project emblem.

a sense of effortlessness when sharing our lived experiences which made it easy for us to bond naturally and shape how we want the project to represent us as a collective. We observed how the incubation was unique and different from other projects that we had participated in before. This was succinctly put by one colleague who said:

> If you compare it to all the workshops, or the conferences or whatever activities that we normally do as colleagues, we do it with our universities and with our gatherings. But this one has been really different. It just pushes itself effortlessly today as you rightfully said that we do not have to do anything, everything just falls into his place and everything is just moving.

The effortlessness and a sense of community allowed us to actively and authentically participate in the activities that were brought forward by different members of the team. Each of the activities we engaged in was intentional and goal directed, and its meaning will be discussed in the ensuing section of the article.

Saluting those who came before us

One of our colleagues lit a candle for the duration of the incubation as a tribute and salutation to our ancestors. This practice of reverence acknowledged that we are standing on the land of those who owned it. Absolon (2010) asserts that this respectful practice does not only acknowledge the coexistence of our past, present, and future but also facilitates introduction of oneself to the spirit, to people and to the spirit of the work you intend on doing. This sets the tone for authentic engagement and an acknowledgment of the roots of our knowledge and where we received our teachings from.

This practice resonates with Jacobs (2016) assertion that our ancestors have demonstrated how nature can bring harmony, especially in situations where conflictual polar ends hold the potential for mutual destruction.

Storytelling

As indicated earlier, the first incubation had colleagues share personal stories of how they were raised; relayed experiences of dispossession and oppression that spanned across our lifespans. This act of storytelling ignited a powerful flame of hope and efficacy through which we can bring about healing and transformation instead of only speaking of transformation. This resonates with the view held by Sium and Ritskes (2013, p. 5) that indigenous story-telling is an act of living resistance; and that "stories are decolonisation theory in its most natural form." The authors argue that storytelling serves multiple purposes, starting with its potential to unify people around a common understanding; and disrupting dominant Eurocentric scholarship that illegitimises the rigor of traditional methodologies of autoethnography and storytelling. In short, indigenous story-telling commands action; that keeps the fire of memory alive in our hearts; that can ignite a mental response to "challenge our heart and feet into action." This cyclical process of story-telling is how indigenous knowledge production becomes living theory and transformative action. The quotes below by two of the colleagues, resonate with these authors powerful position on story-telling as an indigenous tool:

> But literally when, you know, a spring, think of your grandmother's old bed or couch. Yeah. So it goes like this. And it goes down. And for me, it's like, it is that connection of the future in connection of things. I don't know how he tells that story. In African families it is not linear; it's cyclical.

> I think the energy, the spirit, and the energy that that generated from the group, that is set very deeply within my soul, and that has carried me through these days, I want to say a huge appreciation and thank you for that

Absolon (2010) refers to this as the symptom indicating that there is an imbalance – the pain signals the desire for balance to be restored, and in this case a need for the self to connect with the rest of the group. One colleague shared:

> . . . we've used it throughout even this morning, honestly I can feel my body speaking, you know, and that language surpasses just the dialect that we speak, but we speak as a full person.

The critical self-reflection underpinned how we shared our stories and reinforced a sense of interdependence in healing as each of the stories were relatable to the incubator team members. We were reminding ourselves of who we are; how we were raised in our respective communities and how that has influenced our positionality as academics. One of the common themes of convergence during our storytelling was our individual and collective intentions to actively dismantle colonial tactics of divide and rule.

Chawane (2016, p. 80) purports that "Africanness" is itself "an ensemble of ethics;" suggesting that it represents the desire among Africans for the

relational and ideological glue that bind the community together and allow them to challenge the internalized inferiority that underpinned assimilation to Eurocentrism. Due to the connectedness and relationality, we share as black academics, at the core is the principle of Ubuntu. Ubuntu has been popularized across the world and is generally interpreted as meaning "I am because we are" (Desmond Tutu). The notion of "I am because we are," magnifies relational connectedness. It removes individualism and promotes collectivism, which is at the center of the African Knowledge Production Incubators project. Thus, Ubuntu resonates with what we stand for as Africans and highlights the interconnectedness of all people and their environments. The interconnectedness is further espoused by Absolon's four directional circle (2010) that describes the vision, communal relationships, the spirit of the ancestors, the importance of indigenous knowledge production and ideas surrounding healing, which is what stood out for us when we came together in the first incubation and recognized the different forms of life and how that is embodied in what we do and who we are as Africans.

Reading rooms/reflecting rooms

A key methodology we employed during the first incubation was the individual reading of a decolonial article that had to be presented to the rest of the Incubator team. This quest to uphold epistemic justice, prompted the inclusion of reading and reflecting rooms, using the skills of critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 1997) and consciousness-raising (Biko, 1978). The prompt for the exercise was to reflect on our own epistemologies and how we may inadvertently be recolonizing the social work knowledge system.

Sharing of songs

One of the colleagues shared a song "She believes in me" by Wandile Mbambeni (n.d.), a local Eastern Cape, South African artist (https://youtu.be/xDQ4M4Pxao) written and performed for his mother. The meaning of the song and its lyrics was particularly relevant to our incubation as the lyrics speaks to the lessons he drew from his mother's belief in him, i.e.

> She'll tell me I'm black, she'll tell me I'm beautiful. She's the type I inspire to be; she does not give up on me; the type that will tell me to dream what Martin Luther dreamt about; what Steve Biko was about.

Since the African knowledge production's first incubation was focused on the stories that we have "locked up inside of us" and to remember the collective from which we came, the sharing of the song was an active illustration of how deeply meaningful locally generated knowledge can be shared in a creative and inspiring way.

Input on decolonial methodologies

One of the colleagues provided input on decolonial methodologies, specifically highlighting that it is located in a Post-colonial Indigenous paradigm (Chilisa, 2011), with the philosophical underpinning in critical theory, postcolonial discourses, feminist thinking, with the key focus on the researchers becoming learners as well. The ontological assumption is that knowledge is socially constructed, with realities shaped by our multiple connections with the environment, cosmos, the living and the non-living. Values form a critical part in the research process and are characterized by a relational accountability that promotes respect, reciprocity, and rights of those participating in the research process. Another colleague implored the importance of unmuting our silence on the axiology, i.e., the value of doing research. Nathane (2022, p. 149) reiterates that it is "an epistemic imperative to introduce students to knowledge systems that are relevant to the reality of an African context."

Greeting the sun

On the last day of our first incubation iteration, our group took a walk to the beach, where our colleague, who is of South Indian origin, shared a significant ritual of greeting the sun each morning, thanking it for the warmth of new life. Similarly, if they were to take their children on a beach outing, they would first thank the ocean for the privilege to entrust their children to its safekeeping.

This reverence of the interdependence with nature, takes center stage in Absolon (2010) propositioning of Indigenous theory. According to the author of Aboriginal descent, "Indigenous theory is earth based and derived from the teachings of the land, sun, water, sky and all of Creation. It is methodologies of practice integrate the natural teachers and elements of the earth."

Minding our language

We were guarding against using terminology and methods that were familiar and cloaked in colonial Western layers. Our one colleague's motivated it as follows:

> We cannot use the same tools we are trying to challenge

Therefore, instead of generating norms and expectations for our first incubation as a team, we were prompted to reflect on what would make our time together *pleasant* and *meaningful*. These prompts communicated a relational accountability that promotes respect and reciprocity as key values that guided our journey together and is coherent with postcolonial Indigenous paradigm (Chilisa, 2011).

Some of the key concepts we started identifying as problematic in the social service professions domain are: referring to clients as "service users" and not seeing their humanity as *abantu* and human beings; stigmatizing a rich cultural tradition of care and providing for one's parents, as "black tax" instead of recognizing how colonial oppression and structural violence of unemployment has directly contributed to African parents becoming financially dependent on their adult children whilst their white counterparts children inherit the land that was stolen from our forefathers.

Theme 3: What we achieved and how we want the project to be known

One of the key activities that we focused on during our first incubation was the design of an emblem that would characterize the intention and uniqueness of the African Knowledge production Incubators project. While designing the emblem, we focused on what influenced our ways of being and knowing. It came down to connecting to different elements of life as represented in Figure 2 below .

Designed by Abigail Goliath (grade 12 learner and daughter of one of the colleagues on the project).

This co-constructed exercise gave form to the principles that underpin the project. These were articulated into the preceding visual emblem by Abigail Goliath, and characterized the following principles of the project, i.e. we:

- Have a cyclical co-existence with the past, present, and the future
- Exist and grow through relationships and natural bonding with people and the environment
- Create a warm and safe space in our connectedness as a tribe, where we could share our lived experiences through storytelling
- Are all equal and that there no experts
- Respect the life-giving elements of earth, water, fire, air, and space
- Acknowledge the existence of a Higher power and spirit greater than ourselves and therefore bow our heads and bend our knees in reverence, and lastly,
- Are like a coiled spring that can stretch but return to its form

The emblem closely resembles the Indigenous Wholistic theory proposed by Absolon (2010) (refer to the theoretical framework discussed above).

The appreciation of relationality and interconnectedness of all different forms of life was another highlight of the first incubation. One colleague summarized the value of human interconnectedness as follows:

> I'm coming from the very rich background, because in our case, the riches are not determined by the amount of money that you have, what about the world of

> relationships, and the relationality in the relationships that you actually maintain, and knowing really an acknowledging for instance, the role that is played by everybody, whether it is within your own family, or it is in your community, but we were rich, actually in many ways. Hence, you see now the need actually to read, to reimagine, to retell the stories, because definitely, our life cannot only be about them, about the broken families and whatever.

Reciprocal relationships between people and nature (earth, air, fire, water)

One of the key subthemes that we co-constructed from our first incubation was our individual and collective respect for the elements of nature. Through our personal sharing and meaning-making of each other's lived experiences we became aware of how highly we honored the reciprocal relationship that exists between humans and nature. This was articulated as follows by one of the colleagues

> I would say that that's like for me and interconnectedness with the relationships between people and nature. I suppose the five elements of life have a way of speaking to us and they answer back.

This view is echoed by Fadden cited in Jacobs (2016, p. v) who said that

> The first thing you do is you give thanks to everything. You thank the Waters beneath the Earth, the stones, the soil, all the way up to the stars. It's just a reminder of where we are.

Jacobs (2016) emphasizes that our appreciation for each of the life-giving forces, brings about a spiritual connection, which in turn reinforces a mutual respect, love, generosity, conservation, and a deep appreciation for those forces larger than ourselves. He furthermore argues that how we treat these life-giving forces in effect is demonstrative of how we treat ourselves. These include granting acknowledgment of a Higher, greater power and the spirit of the ancestors and those who came before us. Of particular significance is the circle which enclose the Incubator's emblem, signaling the importance of meaning of circles, narrated by poet Oduyoye cited by Nathane (2022): "A Circle expands forever. It covers all who wish to hold hands. And its size depends on each other. It is a vision of solidarity. It turns outwards to interact with the outside. And inward for self-critique."

As African knowledge producers, we learnt to sit next to each other – at equal height, recognizing the warmth that is produced from locating ourselves in our African philosophy and drawing on our rich heritage to contribute to a social work knowledge system with which our students can relate.

Where to from here

Intradepartmental home incubators (shedding of the curriculum)

As social work academics, we learn many tools, techniques, methodologies, ways of understanding students, ways of building working alliances among others. All of this is necessary and useful. But no matter how good or extensive our training might be, we cannot be taught to be great academics by books, trainers, or even solely through multiple hours of practice. This is because our most important tool or instrument that we bring into classrooms and our leadership in research is ourselves, and this instrument of the self needs constant attention and development and, at times, a service and repair. In the words of Alison Hardingham, cited in (Hawkins, 2019), the critical role of the self in developing as a leader, is to develop a deep understanding of ourselves. Who are we, our histories, our narratives, our biases, and prejudices? What are our strengths, our limitations, our blind spots? Only through reflection and recentering as Africans can we fully become. Our intention is to re-imagine and advance knowledge, stimulate conversations, and understanding of social work education in South Africa by challenging the status quo and singular ways of learning and teaching.

The African Knowledge Production Incubators project has embarked on conversations with departmental colleagues from our home departments in our five universities so as to enlarge this circle the six of us have created. In so doing, consciousness and reflexivity is anticipated to be foregrounded within our departments, Each department will be guided through curriculum shedding conversations if they wish to engage using some of the following prompts: Who am I in relation to what I teach and research?; How do I intentionally/unintentionally interrogate the power of knowledge that I hold?; What are my practices around magnifying the voices of Black African students?; How have I Africanised/Indigenised the modules I teach from the ground up?; How do I hold structures in my university to account in relation to dismantling colonial structures?

Concluding remarks

While there are differing views about the role of education in society, there is sufficient literature suggesting that education and, by extension, higher education has an emancipatory role to play (Freire, 1970). From the introductory section and threading through this piece, is the notion that the institutions of higher learning and the social service institutions were not exempted from the colonial agenda and that the country is still characterized by the coloniality barriers. The collective concern is that the continued teaching and rendering of services from the colonial and apartheid welfare approaches is felt by students as well as our communities. Hence, the driving force behind the

collective efforts of the six authors of this paper, is that we acknowledge our position as engaging witnesses in academia and therefore have an obligation toward a decolonial turn against the continuous perpetuation of the colonial matrix – coloniality of knowledge, power and being in social work education and practice in particular. The process of sharing, learning, reflecting, and taking action took center stage in what we refer to as the "African Knowledge Production Incubators."

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