The African Knowledge Production Incubators: Our Story of Doing Research the African Way

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Abstract

This paper addresses the enduring challenge of Eurocentric curricula in higher education, specifically detailing an initiative by African social work scholars to decolonise the social work curriculum. The African Knowledge Production Incubators (AKPI) project, stemming from Nelson Mandela University, University of KwaZulu Natal, Wits University, and Stellenbosch University, adopted a Participatory Action Learning Action Research (PALAR) methodology, inherently democratic and decolonial. Leveraging Zavala's (2016) decolonial framework, the project established 'incubation' spaces where we came together to share and co-create our African lived experiences through storytelling, collective sense-making, and reclaiming our narratives. This process fostered critical consciousness, personal cognitive liberation, and a clear embrace of Afrocentric perspectives, involving postgraduate students in similar processes in their own research. The project foregrounds the decolonisation of self, curriculum and research, demonstrating how storytelling, aligned with PALAR, can achieve decolonial outcomes within social work education. It aims to catalyse thoughtful conversations on integrating African selves within community, curriculum, and scientific inquiry.

Keywords: *African Knowledge Production, incubation, decolonisation, social work education, storytelling, Participatory Action Learning Action Research*

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Introduction

The African Knowledge Production Incubators (AKPI) project was born of restlessness relating to a need for transformation in social work education and a desire to take action (Mbembe, 2016). The project was proposed to the National Research Foundation in the Competitive Support for Unrated Researchers stream in 2020 and accepted (Grant number 129384), with the following research question: What are academics' experiences of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) curriculum and their own contributions to indigenous knowledge production? This article details the Participatory Action Learning Action Research (PALAR) methodology (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Reason & Bradbury, 2008) and demonstrates the process of engaged research. Formal ethical approval was obtained from Nelson Mandela University (H21-HEA-SDP-001). The AKPI project is based on collective sharing and co-creation of African lived experiences (Chilisa, 2020) from six social work academics originally across five South African universities: Nelson Mandela University, University of the Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch University, University of Fort Hare, and University of KwaZulu-Natal, all of whom were granted permission from their universities to participate in this study. The project is designed around the metaphor of incubating, whereby participants spend time in a 'warm, safe space' nourishing themselves by placing their experiences of being raised as African children under the spotlight.

Transformation of the academic self is a natural result of compassionate, affirmative and critical self-reflection (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). It is a crucial first step in decolonial work, particularly pertaining to transforming social work knowledge, education, and curriculum (Higgs, 2012). Self-reflection enhances conscientisation by challenging one's own thinking regarding technocratic academic practices emanating from Western conditioning, thus resulting in shifts in mindset (Mbembe, 2016). Curriculum transformation speaks to breaking down Western knowledges as central ideals (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

The major findings from the AKPI project point towards curriculum transformation in the following way: redesigning educational content that is evidence-based, which for African knowledges includes the lived experiences of all who are involved in learning, teaching, and research (Chilisa, 2020). The findings also underline the following necessary inclusions: authentic module content which centres student knowledges, community and academics' experiences, and challenges as well as structural determinants of such lived experiences. Inviting and documenting ancestral and cultural wisdoms pertaining to problem solving, and beginning to understand the centrality of the spiritual world as underpinning African living were further found to be key drivers of a decolonial curriculum.

The AKPI project is thus situated at the intersection of personal narrative, student activism, and scholarly innovation. It emerges from the recognition that decolonisation is not only about curriculum reform but also about the transformation of self and reclaiming of epistemic agency. In this project, decolonisation extends beyond mere rejection of the unilateral dominance of Western knowledge. Drawing from scholars like Maldonado-Torres (2007), Mbembe (2016), Mignolo (2007), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

(1986), decolonisation is understood as an ongoing process of epistemic reorientation that recognises the plurality of knowledges and legitimises diverse voices. Within this framework, knowledge production becomes a collaborative process in which local perspectives and experiences coexist alongside, rather than below, Western paradigms. Decolonisation is not a new order that seeks to replace the Western with the African, but rather a relational process that repositions Africa at the centre of discourse and practice (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). It further calls for the co-existence of diverse knowledge systems, including Eurocentric frameworks, while promoting culturally sensitive and contextually relevant practices that respond to societal realities (Coates et al., 2013; Tamburro, 2013; Smit & Nathane, 2018; Qalinge & Van Breda, 2019).

By foregrounding storytelling, healing, and collective meaning-making, the project demonstrates that knowledge production is not a neutral or abstract endeavour but a deeply relational and political process. It challenges the dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies and asserts the legitimacy of African perspectives in shaping curricula, research practices, and the very purpose of higher education. It highlights how personal histories intersect with collective struggles, the structural barriers that impede change, and the transformative possibilities that emerge when academics and students work collaboratively toward epistemic justice. Because African voices have long been silenced, we use pronouns such as 'I', 'we' and 'us' with the intention to claim our narratives.

Context

Everything begins with the self and with those who came before us. Our identities, experiences, and ways of knowing are shaped not only by family and community but also by the formal education system – a system historically not designed by, or for, people of colour. This system, rooted in colonial legacies, requires us to assimilate knowledge constructs that bear little resonance with our lived realities. In turn, these constructs are often transmitted as values to subsequent generations, resulting in a cycle where, consciously or unconsciously, we begin to resemble the employers and oppressors of our parents and grandparents. As Mbembe (2016) reminds us, colonial education was not only about transmitting knowledge but also about producing compliant subjects, disciplined to reproduce the logic of empire.

As Nevashnee Perumal, I situate myself within this historical trajectory as a fourth-generation South African of South Indian indenture origin, whose profession is social work and whose current role is within academia (Perumal et al., 2023). My positionality is significant: as an academic, I work in a 'thinking space', a university, where thoughts ought to be transformed into action that advances the public good (Matsiliza, 2022). Yet, during the #FeesMustFall (FMF) student movements, my own restlessness intensified. The protests, ignited by students demanding free, decolonised education, underscored for me the urgency of disrupting the epistemic injustices embedded in higher education. The African Knowledge Production Incubators (AKPI) project was born out of this restlessness,

catalysed by the recognition that change begins with collective efforts to reimagine knowledge (Perumal et al., 2024).

The AKPI project created safe academic spaces for like-minded, like-hearted, and like-spirited academics and postgraduate students who shared a deep desire to decolonise and indigenise the social work curriculum. This process began with the most fundamental of human practices: storytelling. Storytelling became a means to reflect on and process the pain endured as marginalised people during apartheid and in post-democratic South Africa. For the teller, stories offer catharsis and self-reflection; for the listener, they provoke imagination, curiosity, and empathy. By narrating our experiences and engaging in reciprocal listening, we collectively attached meaning to shared resonances. These meanings were documented and distilled into common themes that provided the foundations for the indigenous knowledge we sought to produce – and the colonised knowledge we aimed to untangle. Storytelling, as Zavala (2016) argues, is a decolonial strategy that affirms the multiplicity of voices and ways of knowing, resisting the silencing effects of Eurocentric epistemologies.

The question arises: What sparked this project? The origins are deeply personal. As a child of the Group Areas Act, my upbringing was sheltered, geographically restricted, and framed by structural inequalities. During the FMF student protests which unfolded in 2015 and 2016, heralding a call and demand for free decolonised education across universities in South Africa (Nathane & Harms-Smith, 2017), I became acutely aware of the severity of institutionalised injustices perpetuated against students. Their demands for free, decolonised education resonated with my own educational journey. Yet I had not previously recognised the extent to which I too had been subjected to similar epistemic violence. In my lower-middle-class household, the single rule was clear: my father would take out loans to fund my education, and my responsibility was to pass, secure employment, and repay the debt. Within this framework, I had not paused to question whose knowledge I was consuming, or whether it spoke to the realities of my community.

Although scholars and students have historically called for transformation in higher education, these critical post-democratic protests revealed that students were being subjected to curricula that centred knowledge from distant countries and contexts that appeared only on maps, yet whose epistemologies dominated South African classrooms. These imported knowledges were often disconnected from local realities, and, paradoxically, were implicated in the very socio-economic challenges facing the African continent. Students were expected to learn about 'other people's problems' and adopt 'other people's solutions' while their own lived realities were rendered invisible. This mirrors what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) calls the "coloniality of knowledge," in which Africa remains positioned as a consumer of external epistemologies rather than a producer of knowledge grounded in its own histories and struggles. When students began to resist and assert their constitutional rights to free, decolonised education, they were met with intimidation, violence, and criminalisation (Langa, 2017). This systemic silencing of student voices underscored the moral imperative to act.

My initial attempt at action was through a research proposal that aimed to decolonise social work theory, skills, and practice. The proposal was rejected at institutional level. Although I have since blocked out the specific reasons given, I vividly remember the impact of the rejection: a profound sense of weakness, despondency, and defeat. I abandoned the idea at that moment, but the deep threads of social justice remained restless within me, persistently pulling at my conscience.

The opportunity to reignite this vision arose when the National Research Foundation (NRF) issued a funding call that foregrounded developmental research. I cautiously revisited my earlier proposal, but this time reframed it as a collaborative project. Drawing on the strength of meaningful collegial relationships, I engaged scholars strategically positioned at different universities across South Africa, including the University of Fort Hare, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Stellenbosch University, and the University of the Witwatersrand. The latter three universities span the continuum of privilege in the South African higher education landscape, enabling the project to engage across diverse contexts of resource access and institutional culture. This aligns with Santos's (2014) call for an *ecology of knowledges* – a recognition that knowledge is plural, situated, and enriched through dialogue across contexts of privilege and marginalisation.

At the core of this project was a team of committed academics, each of whom was expected to mentor at least one postgraduate student. Laterally, the project sought to extend its reach by initiating incubators within each participant's academic department, thereby encouraging departmental colleagues to engage with decolonial conversations. This layered design ensured that the project was not limited to isolated individuals but instead seeded change at multiple levels: personal, interpersonal, departmental, institutional, and across institutions.

The NRF approved the proposal (NRF CSUR grant numbers 129384), and institutional ethical clearance was subsequently granted (H21-HEA-SDP-001). What had once been rejected was now formally recognised and resourced. For the project team, this moment marked a symbolic 'once upon a time', the beginning of a new story that connected personal histories, collective struggles, and academic praxis. It affirmed that resistance and persistence are essential to decolonial scholarship and that rejection does not signify the end of possibility but may catalyse new and more resilient beginnings. The following sections outline the conceptual foundations of the project, the methodological choices that shaped its implementation, and the insights gained from its early phases of incubation. In doing so, we contribute to ongoing conversations about decolonisation, indigenisation, and the urgent task of reimagining higher education for the public good.

Research Methodology

This qualitative research study followed a Participatory Action Learning Action Research (PALAR) methodology. As a genre of action research, PALAR was a natural fit for the AKPI research journey, since it is a transformative method that is democratic and decolonial in

its design. Zuber-Skerrit (2011) proposes that PALAR is well-suited to address complex problems, especially those that advance a social justice agenda. Our agenda (and the resistance received to its launch), is clear from the description Nevashnee Perumal offers in the previous section.

Zuber-Skerritt (2018, p. 515) defines PALAR as "a special kind of action research that integrates various concepts and processes, including lifelong learning, collaborative action learning, participatory action research, and action leadership." In relation to the AKPI project, it became apparent that the PALAR method was suitable for decolonial educational engagement, where hierarchy and imposed knowledge systems are being challenged and dismantled. Consequently, PALAR became instrumental to co-generate knowledge and facilitate meaningful transformation across educational spaces. Applying PALAR encouraged us to take ownership of our challenges and devise a means to resolve them through the combined processes of action research (AR), using action learning (AL) and participatory action research (PAR) (Zuber-Skerrit, 2011).

We realised that the process of decolonisation had to start with the courageous interrogation and ultimately transformation of the self, as a precursor to the transformation of the curriculum and our respective academic spaces (Race et al., 2022). This approach concurs with the ontology of participative reality, characteristic of PALAR. We therefore invested a significant amount of time in self-reflexivity, which required journeying through our concrete experiences and the critical reflections on these experiences. Self-reflexivity, a critical data generation technique in PALAR, became a daily mantra of the AKPI co-researchers and culminated in personalised printed journals and video recordings of our heritage. Reflecting on our personal experiences required plenty of self-compassion. Neff (2021) describes self-reflexivity (inherent to self-compassion) as a process of acknowledging and accepting one's pain as instrumental in making a U-turn to the self.

Since PALAR has a deeply relational ontology, our data generation methods included having intentional and rigorous engagements through storytelling (Zavala, 2016). All our engagements centred around a particular focus area, where each of our critical subjectivities could be heard and critiqued. This dialectical epistemology became the launching pad for collaborative learning, unlearning and relearning. For me, Veonna Goliath, this involved unlearning the demonisation of the Khoisan ritual of "trance states" (Minguzzi, 2025). This iterative examination of practice included planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Zuber-Skerrit, 2011), a process that facilitated the integration of theory, praxis, research, and action. We acknowledge the limitation of excluding undergraduate students and broader community voices from this process, however, deliberately decided to delineate our focus, as this first incubation unmasked a lot of painful, internalised marginalisations, which we knew required an immersive, slower process. We decided that as we deepen the conversation with the delineated sample groups, we would learn the process of how to widen the scope and expand the sample groups, which is a risk mitigation approach and part of the accountability of researchers (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

The research process is described in more detail below, using the PALAR 'donut' model (Figure 1) proposed by Zuber-Skerrit (2011).

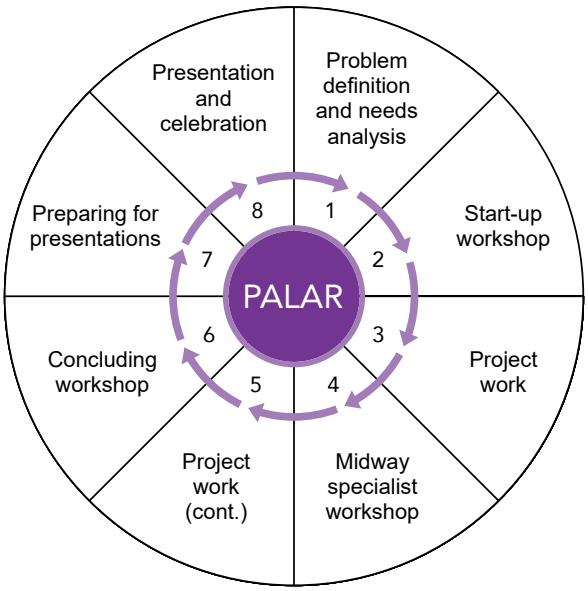

Figure 1: PALAR donut model (Zuber-Skerrit)

The process encompasses eight cycles, which ensued with the initial problem definition and needs analysis (*described in the introduction*) followed by the start-up workshop in Gqeberha, where the six core team members of AKPI formed what is known in action research as the Action Learning Set (ALS) (Zuber-Skerrit, 2011). The dialogical and dialectical engagement was the primary data generation method. We converged around the shared vision to learn how to centre African knowledge in our social work curriculum so that our students could learn how to render unprejudiced, context-specific social work services.

Each of these soulful engagements directed us to the next steps in the cyclical journey. The reflection during the iterative cycles of knowledge engagement alerted us to the exclusion of student voices, thus activating the authentic transformative action (Hunter et al., 2013) of inviting postgraduate students whose work aligned with the vision of the AKPI project. This stimulated the next cycle of experimental learning at the Gauteng and Gqeberha international incubations together with the six postgraduate students, which accelerated action leadership (Zuber-Skerrit, 2011). The subsequent cycles of action are reflected in the project timeline in Table 1 in the article. Our engagements with the colleagues in South India are also presented through our first person reflection, in accordance with our REC-H clearance conditions. The critical reflections on each of the data generation cycles were consistently and continuously coded because the cyclical process of

generating and analysing data is interlinked, and reflection is integrated into every data-generation session.

The multiple sources of data were also triangulated through engagements in the ALS, self-reflexivity, personal journaling, and photostory books. When the postgraduate students became part of the second ALS, it became critical for the core team of academics to ensure that our voices were not dominating; that we remained accountable in our supervisee-supervisor relationship, in addition to being co-researchers in the AKPI project. We engaged in regular member checking to check for potential biases and reflecting on our different roles (Savenye & Robinson, 2011). One of the main challenges we encountered was balancing the complexity of our academic roles, especially being from five different universities, as our academic calendars were seldom synchronised. This also necessitated robust and frank discussions where compassionate accountability checks allowed a natural reconnection with the soul of the AKPI journey. Each of the data generation cycles and the meaning-making from these processes is described in the story section of the article.

Conceptual Framework: Decolonial Education

Zavala's conception of decolonial education strategies is instrumental in the area of Participatory Action Research (PAR), and by extension, in PALAR (Zavala, 2013; 2016). The key notion in his assertion is that decolonising research strategies are less about the quest for new methods and more about the intellectual, relational, and experiential spaces that enable decolonial research to take place. The collaboration amongst the AKPI researcher/participants is testament to this notion, and this collaboration enabled and promoted counter/storytelling, remembering/naming, healing, and reclaiming, which Zavala (2016) outlines as key strategies, for interrupting dominant knowledge hierarchies and affirming the indigenous epistemologies. Zavala (2016) further describes the interlocking relationship between storytelling, naming, and reclaiming as dynamic and developmental rather than linear and foundational. Decolonial education, particularly in social work, therefore serves as a critical intervention against the ongoing influence of Eurocentric and colonial epistemologies that continue to shape global knowledge systems. We actively challenged the persistent marginalisation of our Indigenous and African knowledge systems through the AKPI project by harnessing knowledges from the ground up thereby seeking to re-center our epistemologies as legitimate in the production of knowledge (Mignolo, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

It is worth noting the significance of framing our contribution within PALAR and decolonial education as a method of research and theory as well as praxis of engagement. As Zavala (2013) alludes, over and above selecting appropriate methods, decolonial education is critical in creating institutional, communal, and political spaces where indigenous communities have real decision-making power. Notably, the decolonial strategies of telling the story of how we conducted our research, as well as how we used storytelling, naming and reclaiming to gather our data, is detailed in the sections that follow. Grounding our work

on an Afrocentric perspective, through storytelling, naming and reclaiming, we not only affirm the co-existence of multiple epistemologies, but also consciously resist the colonial influence, intending to embrace the lived experiences and communal ways of knowing. Here, we only present a brief explanation and a summary of the framework.

Counter/storytelling

The 'outsiders-within' positionality resonated amongst us as the researcher/participants because we acknowledge that our thinking does not fit into the dominant Eurocentric and Western cultures that universities are structured around. Although we are constrained by these norms, telling our stories of being raised as African children and of how we did this research is an act of resisting institutional norms. It is this border thinking, sitting as academics of colour between indigenous knowledges and colonial western knowledge in the university, that catalysed resistance in the form of practicing alternatives in our research through our real and lived experiences. Zavala (2016) describes the naming as mediated by dialogue, while this dialogue is made possible by reflections upon the lived experiences of and with colonialism in all its forms. As we engaged in group dialogues *(izimbizo*) and reflections, with other scholars and students, we emphasised raising consciousness about the impact of colonialism and coloniality in educational contexts. This awareness-raising endeavour focused on developing the ability to critically see and describe how systems of injustice continue to shape our lives today, often operating beneath our conscious awareness (Freire, 1998).

Healing

Social/collective healing and spiritual/psychological healing are two practices identified in the second decolonial strategy (Zavala, 2016). We saw this as a form of restoration of our marginalised lived experiences. Zavala clarifies that healing for indigenous communities is a collective experience. The AKPI's collective engagements through imbizos with local and global scholars, students, cultural leaders, historians and communities created healing spaces and provided support that shifted away from individualism and dependence on Western validation, thus reclaiming the power of our own epistemologies.

Reclaiming of identities and spaces

Reclaiming is described as "a strategy in decolonial education that involves recovering who people are (their cultural identities), their practices, and their relation to place (land, cosmos)" (Zavala, 2016, p. 5). Zavala also underlines that the insider-outsider position that we, as academics of colour, occupy in the university places us in an enabling position to engage in PAR research. This research method sees to it that indigenous knowledges are collectively and ethically reclaimed from communities and placed at the centre of learning and teaching. As an AKPI project team, we did this through a shared, conscious understanding of how knowledge production is rooted in specific geographies, cosmology,

and cultural landscapes, with emphasis on connections of knowledge to land, ancestry, and spiritual dimensions, to name a few (Perumal et al., 2024). It is this acknowledgement that led us to approach data generation, analysis and reporting/documenting of our experiences through a decolonial lens of storytelling in this article.

Storying the Story of Incubators: Successes and challenges

This section details the successes and challenges of the project, and its contribution to broader debates on decolonial research in Africa and beyond. Table 1 below presents a chronological overview of key milestones, from its award during the COVID-19 lockdown to subsequent incubations and conferences. During the project period, we developed artefacts in the form of a podcast detailing the realities of PALAR (*Social Work Khuluma*) as well as two photobooks using SHOWeD principles (Wang & Burris, 1997), one with our histories and collective statement of intent as the extended project team, and our journey through South India in the other.

Table 1: Chronological overview of key milestones in the NRF Competitive Support for Unrated Researchers Project

Dec 2020	NRF Competitive Support for Unrated Researchers grant awarded during COVID-19 lockdown, South Africa
Jun 2021	First core team incubation
Oct 2022	Ventana imbizo
Jan 2023	Incubation in South India
Feb 2023	Setting up home incubators in university departments
Jul 2023	Mini incubators established
Sep 2023	ASASWEI Conference imbizo
Dec 2023	International imbizos – WITS (Johannesburg) & NMU (Gqeberha)
May 2024	Rhodes University Community Engagement Conference (Grahamstown)

First Core Team Incubation

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The purpose of our first incubation, which was held in Gqeberha in June 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, was to generate data for our project's first objective viz. telling stories of our lived experiences of being African. The question of 'who is an African?' is beyond the scope of this article, however our conception is that an African varies across intellectual and political traditions, and that being African transcends biological or geographical

boundaries. Hook (2004) describes Africanness as grounded in a shared psychological and political consciousness of resistance to oppression, uniting diverse groups, who are subjected to racial, systematic and structural marginalisation. From this perspective, being African is not a visible identity but a state of consciousness. As Morgan (2020) asserts, Africanness therefore becomes a collective assertion of dignity, agency and belonging in defiance of historical silencing or negation.

We approached the first incubation with a common purpose of decolonising the social work curriculum. The imperative was to consider the lived experiences, fears, and aspirations we brought to the project. Herein, we shared stories of how we met and what drew us to each other, as well as significant moments in our upbringings, cultural heritages, how these influenced our positionality as academics, and why the AKPI project matters to us. Kovach (2009) argues that it is the responsibility of those in positions able to influence knowledge production to share and voice stories of the oppressed. Authenticity and collectivism as the AKPI team permitted a deeper connection, characterised by openness and vulnerability in sharing our stories. The sharing of stories was a powerful strategy, demonstrating our rich, inherent knowledge systems. There was a deeper appreciation of each other as holistic beings after stories were shared.

Colonial spaces like universities promote individual alienation, contradicting African societies' emphasis on collective belonging and ancestral connection. African traditions maintain that understanding one's origins is essential for future direction. In African languages the saying *if you do not know where you come from, you will not know where to go* highlights the importance of having a clear sense of our origins and lineage. As Africans, we connect with the spirit of our ancestors who carry us, and always feel their presence (Masango, 2006). During gatherings, we acknowledge them through *iingoma* (songs) and *izibongo* (praise poems), candle lighting, and conversations, so they may guide us through the journey ahead (Mvenene, 2024). These acts, according to Chen (2025), are integral in African life, rituals, and social interactions. It bears the ability to influence emotional states and physiological response.

Our stories reflected the richness in the traditions and rituals we inherited from our ancestral and local knowledge holders and wisdom bearers. There were significant intersections in our experiences, pertaining specifically to values of family orientation, social justice, and *Ubuntu*, amongst others. The physical and emotional space that the incubations afforded us enabled us the safety and warmth that was needed to learn, unlearn, and relearn, with the common vision to transform social work education. These learnings translated into guidelines for setting up home incubators in our university departments and the need to involve postgraduate students as collaborators in the project. These experiences are documented in the published article: *African knowledge production incubators: Approaching indigenous and decolonized social work from the ground up through stories of our lived experiences* (Perumal et al., 2024).

Ventana Imbizo

In a hybrid format imbizo at the 4th Ventana Conference on Latin America in October 2022, hosted by the University of York in the United Kingdom under the theme Decolonial Dialogues from, within and beyond the Global Margins, we were drawn by the subthemes and formats to present an online imbizo. Imbizo in isiZulu is translated to mean a community gathering called to solve pertinent community issues. Practitioners, researchers and individuals with an interest in Latin America and perspectives on the African decolonial experience were invited to facilitate workshops or present papers that question, unsettle, rethink or disobey coloniality. We all convened in Gqeberha and joined the conference online while in the same room, which allowed us to have uninterrupted connection, and which deepened our sense of togetherness as a tribe. In our project, the construct 'tribe' metaphorically represents the community of practice united by shared values and collective identity. Whilst the term 'tribe' is historically contested due to its colonial associations with primitive, territorialism and cultural othering (Gingrich, 2015), we consciously reclaim it as a construct symbolising the sense of community and shared purpose.

During an imbizo, community members sit in circles with no one being elevated but everyone being equally recognised as a contributor in the community. Everyone's voice is heard, and the circle symbolises connectedness, underpinning the African value of *Ubuntu*. In Africa, an imbizo holds great significance as a platform for honest engagements on shared interests and concerns. It allows communities to collaboratively strategise and develop sustainable solutions that advance their interests (Baloyi & Lubinga, 2017; Pahad & Esterhuyse, 2002). When conducting the imbizo, we acknowledged those who came before us, whose shoulders we are standing on. We shared a video that we created during our first incubation, of who we are and why decolonial work is important to us. In line with decolonial principles of acknowledging those who came before us, we also recognised the discomfort created by such dialogues which demand that scholars state their positionality. Hence, at every conference or imbizo, we reflected on our positionality as African scholars as well as the persistence of colonial structures, practices, and the empowerment of marginalised communities by questioning, rethinking, and disobeying coloniality through critical approaches of how we teach and conduct research. Key to the imbizo was inviting conference participants to share their experiences or views about decolonisation. The prompt questions we used to engage with participants in the imbizo were:

- Share how coloniality manifests itself in your professional practice, spaces, classroom, and academia.
- What is your contribution to decolonial/indigenous knowledge production?

During this conference we met scholar Adriana Moreno Cely, a Colombian activist, culminating in an online meeting where we co-generated knowledge of how participatory action research with indigenous communities can translate into the praxis of re-valuing

indigenous and local knowledge (Moreno Cely, 2022). This imbizo asserted that the daily dynamics of accumulation, separation and systemic oppression continue to dominate the Global South, meaning that the end of the colonies did not translate to the end of coloniality (Mashau, 2018). Knowledge from the Global South continues to be framed as inferior, unproductive, or even non-existent, while the knowledge systems of the Global North are upheld as valid, hegemonic, and universally valuable (Moreno Cely et al., 2021).

For example, some participants shared that a teacher or researcher from Latin America working in the UK must grapple with being an outsider within the academy, which resonates with Zavala's insider-outsider construct. In contexts such as Canada, the debate highlighted that inclusivity is not synonymous with decolonisation, since the latter requires more than simply including underrepresented populations. This raised critical questions about how we perpetuate decolonial thinking within our own spaces, while recognising that we may unintentionally remain complicit in sustaining colonial agendas.

Incubation in South India

In pursuit of knowledge and insights from countries that have traversed decolonial and indigenous discourse, the AKPI team visited three universities in India in January 2023 for international symposiums. India, having been a pioneer in developing fully indigenous curricula and sharing similarities with South Africa as a 'developing' nation', presented an ideal learning ground. During the trip, interactions took place with colleagues and students at Bharathiar University (BU), Gandhigram Rural Institute (GRI), and Central University of Tamil Nadu (CUTN). There was a deep appreciation from both countries for our cultural and ethnic commonalities and diversities. The India visit culminated in a creative output in the form of a photobook entitled: *South Africa in South India: A photo journey of the African Knowledge Production Incubators*. Employing the photovoice method (Wang & Burris, 1997), our blurbs captured the meanings we ascribed to some of the moments throughout the journey in India. It was important for us to generate creative outputs, regardless of the publication status, so that our memories, forged relationships, stories exchanged and lessons learnt are captured in ways that speak to the communities we visited as well.

We gifted these photobooks to the colleagues in India for onward sharing with the communities and students with whom we engaged. Our individual reflections as documented in the photo book revealed contrasting university models between India and South Africa. Indian institutions exemplify community-engaged universities, honouring indigenous heritage through intergenerational knowledge transmission and open integration with surrounding communities. Universities serve as accessible spaces fostering patriotism, cultural celebration, and collective learning through community involvement. Conversely, South African universities remain isolated 'ivory towers' distant from community needs, reflecting colonial legacies that prioritise exclusion over transformative engagement and indigenous knowledge preservation.

Setting up Home Incubators in University Departments

Setting up home incubators in our academic departments, as an AKPI objective, was challenging. Colleagues in our home departments questioned why we embarked on this project. They wondered whether it meant we are questioning the validity of the current curriculum and claiming it is not decolonised or indigenous. Colleagues were also wondering 'what is in it for them?' if they do engage and participate in the home incubators. We rationalise these dilemmas as being rooted in Eurocentric and Western ways of knowing and doing research. As the saying goes, 'it was not a bed of roses', especially in historically white institutions.

For one of us working in a historically white institution in the Western Cape, it was difficult to have a conversation about decolonisation and indigenisation of the social work curriculum. It constantly felt as though there was a need to protect the historical roots of the department and the curriculum, almost as though it would be violating a sacred code if the department agreed to even embrace the idea of the project. Therefore, penetrating through the systems that have existed for over 100 years was no easy task. Nonetheless, we are proud of the small shifts that were observed as the project was progressing. Salient informal and individual conversations and subtle departmental discussions about the need to decolonise the curriculum, some emanating from postgraduate students' research interests, was encouraging. However, there was no outward move to begin removing the structure of western roots in its entirety.

For another one of us, in the Eastern Cape, the idea of setting up home incubators was received almost as a 'fear of the unknown' although our academic department started facilitated decolonial conversations a year before this project began. A significant observation was that the fear of colleagues to participate in the incubation could possibly have been fuelled by one of the AKPI team members also being the head of department at the time. This signalled an acute reminder of the intersectionality of one's identity with power, privilege and positionality (Weekes, 2023). We started with five (and ended with four) of nine colleagues who joined the monthly lunch hour conversations where we began by telling stories of how our families shaped our identities based on the apartheid government's rules, how we accessed various educational spaces, the pain of poverty, addiction, indenture, and the awareness of being White and Afrikaans speaking. These conversations enabled us to better understand why we do what we do as colleagues, in our classrooms, in our courses, in our social events and staff meetings resulting in the beginning of decolonial transitions in our department.

In a third academic department in KwaZulu-Natal, the conversations around decoloniality had long been happening and it was already incorporated into the department's research meetings. The department called these conversations *Isivivane* and hosted Nevashnee twice to engage with colleagues, postgraduate students, and members of other departments in the faculty. The feeling of warmth, belonging, purpose and hope permeated these engagements with a deep resolve that unshackling ourselves from coloniality is possible as a collective.

In the fourth academic department, which is in Gauteng, there was one introductory incubation held. There was extensive work done to follow the internal university process of inviting academics to participate in the session. While academics were all invited, the session was attended mainly by a few academics who were new to the department, and the AKPI project team members joined online. The conversations started with a provocation called 'the sayings of the wise': academics were invited to share indigenous sayings and proverbs shared by elders in their families. The hybrid conversations revolved around decolonising the adoption and child protection processes in South African families by tapping into indigenous knowledge systems practiced by African societies. Childrearing and child protection practices from different cultural groups were shared, and it was evident that much of this rich knowledge is known and practiced widely in African societies. The session was concluded with sharing of homecooked African cuisine that was prepared by Motlalepule at her home. Academics who did not join the session were welcomed to share a meal and further conversations on indigenous knowledge family practices ensued.

We problematise the traditional ways of being in academia, which emphasise the careerist approach driven by a neo-liberal capitalist agenda (Dlamini, 2019; Sewpaul, 2024) in the following ways. Firstly, the competitive 'publish or perish' ideal that does not promote a collaborative research approach among academics. Challenges to setting up home incubators bore testament to this by the reluctance of academic staff members to be part of the project, as there was a belief that they would be contributing to the development of others. This thinking is counterproductive in the broader vision of indigenous knowledge production. Therefore, all the AKPI outputs are collective and collaborative, disrupting systems of subsidy accumulation as single author in one institution only.

Postgraduate Reflections on Mini Incubators

Nkqubela Aphiwe Ntloko, Dzunisani Euginea Baloyi, Crucial Mutambu, Tinstwalo Novela, Brian Muvhali, Nokwanda Myende

As postgraduate students, our involvement in the mini incubators imbizo enriched democratic participation, aligning with the PALAR outcomes of democracy and emancipation (Wood, 2019; Kearney et al., 2013). The process was devoid of power imbalances among the co-researchers, no head or tail as everyone assumed equal responsibility. Thinking minds and compassionate hearts created an inclusive space where everyone felt respected and worthy. Experiences, wisdom, and ideas were heard and sharpened with keen interest. Our senses were awakened to our Africanness, the injustices and opportunities to address them inspired us to contribute African solutions to African problems; to reclaim Africa for Africans and the diaspora. The imbizo levelled power, enhanced collaboration, and forged partnerships, challenging the ingrained hierarchy of academic knowledge production. Scholars agree that its participatory, robust, and thorough nature also makes it a relevant data generating tool (Baloyi & Lubinga, 2017; Mathangu, 2010).

Furthermore, we fostered empowerment, knowledge exchange (*umrhabuliso*), and realised Ubuntu through communalism, promoting African identity and values. Our experiences in this academic project showed Ubuntu transcending rhetoric and standing as a lived ethic. Instead of being flattened into sameness, we flourish individually through academic and psychosocial support that endures in our family-like/tribe and bond as the AKPI team. Academic prefixes such as Professor, Doctor, were set aside and our given names used to address and engage each other. In African culture, naming is deeply sacred, it carries historical significance in shaping identity (Madima, 2024). Therefore, addressing each other by our first names or relationship eg. sister, elder, brother, etc. was affirming their meanings, lineage, and purpose. Names in Africa are foretelling, and intrinsically tied to spirituality, ancestry, identity, and social structure meant to heal the community (Kanu, 2019). A person's name is considered to be the person's soul possessing celestial powers and embodying spirit (Olatunji et al., 2015). We formed strong bonds and organic relationships, something rare in academia where power hierarchies often position senior professionals above students who are typically seen as recipients of empowerment and knowledge.

Our interconnections have nurtured our strength to navigate professional and personal life demands, further affirming African knowledge as scientific, significant, and equal to other knowledges (Alem, 2019; Hountondji, 2009). An imbizo provided the practical framework of collaborative expression, while Ubuntu made us feel at home. The essence of Ubuntu could not have been fully captured using English alone. A significant milestone in the mini-incubator was the photobook creation, whereby we comfortably introduced ourselves in our mother tongue, without pressure to translate it to western standards of academia. Centralising and integrating African languages was paramount, as language embodies culture, identity, and indigenous knowledge. Thus the incubator challenged the assumption that intelligence is measured by mastery of a dominant or foreign language, particularly when so much of academic production relies on borrowed linguistic systems, like English, that reproduce hierarchies of knowledge value.

This second unpublished photobook, *Our stories of being raised as African children in South Africa*, challenges historical marginalisation and fosters decolonial scholarship (Segalo & Cakata, 2017; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). Coming together reminded us that our stories are interconnected and original, making them worthy of publication. The experience fostered belonging through Ubuntu, family, and community, while providing an opportunity to address our collective frustrations and explore sustainable solutions to our daily challenges as social workers.

Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) Imbizo

As a lateral and vertical project, the AKPI project aimed towards inclusion of academic departments, postgraduate students, and practitioners as key drivers of decoloniality. At the 2023 ASASWEI conference, we requested to present an imbizo with an audience of

academics, students and practitioners instead of a group podium didactic presentation. In keeping with the theme of the conference pertaining to natural disasters and pandemics, we based the imbizo using Zavala's storytelling design and deliberated on what healing strategies were used and found useful for communities during disasters and pandemics. This well-attended session started with brief inputs from project members, but the entire session was audience-led, which created an equalising platform (Santos, 2014; Zuber-Skerritt, Wood & Kearney, 2020). The topic of disasters and pandemics resonated with the audience since the conference was held in KwaZulu-Natal province, a province affected by natural disasters. The atmosphere was charged and the session ended with a song led by the audience which continued to the main plenary session, where the whole conference joined in demonstrating the power of iingoma from the ground up.

International Imbizos in South Africa

Following the work done with academics in our home departments, postgraduate students, and the practitioners, the project culminated by hosting two international imbizos on South African soil; one in Gauteng and the other in Gqeberha. Postgraduate students of the core incubator team as well as our home incubator colleagues attended. We intentionally lined up Sister Hilaria Soundari, who is a Catholic sister working at Gandhigram Rural Institute, Marisol Sanchez, an ex-academic from Ecuador and now yoga instructor and subsistence farmer, Brian Mogaki, a historian and a senior tour guide at the WITS Origins Centre, and Chief Edmund Stuurman, a chief of the Khoisan people in Gqeberha. We are of the view that the spirit of our ancestors, as well as the deepening of our intention in this project through the varied incubations, assisted us to curate this line up.

We were clear that we wished to create opportunities to learn from people who navigated cultures, spirituality, community education, quests for social justice, theories of life before colonisation and apartheid, and ancestral wisdoms. We revelled in the vernacular terms such as *iingoma* (isiZulu term meaning 'songs'), *intlalontle* (isiXhosa term meaning 'living well'), and *sumak kawsa*i (Kwicha term meaning 'life in harmony'). All these resonate with the core purpose of social work. We spoke about the processes and strategies during imbizos in communities where the calabash holding *amahewu/umqomboti* (traditional drink) is passed around the circle of people without discrimination for all to partake of. We realised that joint problem solving begins with equalising power (Damons & Wood, 2020), all voices are heard (men, women, non-gender conforming people, children, youth and the elderly) as we have attempted in the AKPI project.

Sister Hilaria Soundari sensitised us to the street corner model of engaging with youth, which translates into working in the places where the people who require help are situated. She further spoke about the honeybee model of social interactions, meaning to take the 'best nectar' from any situation. Marisol Sanchez demonstrated, through a welcoming ritual, how to acknowledge the earth, water, wind, and fire, showing similarities to our indigenous cultures and traditions. Chief Stuurman showed us the presence of an ancestor

in full human form in a family photograph, which was unexplainable by the family since the person had long passed. Brian Mogaki explained how the first nations in our country had traversed spirituality through the reverence of the eland antelope and how men and women played equal parts in navigating the spirit world.

We concluded the imbizos with an engaged exhibition of our photobook, where everyone could affirm as well as clarify indigenous practices that each of us outlined in our photostories. As described by Perumal et al. (2024), as Africans we express our feelings through how we experience them in our bodies, and therefore after the international imbizos 'our hearts were full and our heads were spinning' (in a transformative way). Additionally, the international imbizos fostered collective sense-making and active reclamation of indigenous narratives, including epistemological diversity, power equalisation and cultural integration. Ultimately, the process aimed to achieve the decolonisation of self, curriculum, and research, leading to transformative experiences.

Limitations

Having a sample consisting of academics with limited student inclusion as research participants restricted the generalisability of the findings to broader civic partners. However, the generated findings serve as a catalyst for change, which becomes a medium through which civic community voices can be invited when reflecting on the findings of the study. We were intentional about using research methods that are congruent with our indigenous research approaches, and used the reflexive cycles as the triangulation checks, referred to as "process validity in action research" (Damons & Wood, 2020).

Conclusions and Way Forward

The AKPI project was established as a collaborative space to nurture decolonial, contextually grounded forms of scholarship and to challenge dominant hierarchies of knowledge production in social work education. It is concluded that this project makes a three-fold scholarly contribution. Firstly, it positions the AKPI model as a novel, scalable, and multi-institutional framework that advances decolonial collaboration, thus providing a significant contribution to decolonial praxis. Secondly, it highlights the methodological innovation demonstrated through the integration of Participatory Action Learning Action Research (PALAR) with Zavala's decolonial constructs: storytelling, healing and reclaiming, thereby establishing a rigorous methodology for generating African-centred knowledge. Thirdly, the theoretical contribution is made by providing empirical evidence affirming that the 'decolonisation of the self' encompassing critical consciousness and cognitive liberation, is a foundational precursor essential for meaningful curriculum and institutional transformation.

Key lessons applicable beyond the immediate context include recognising storytelling as a legitimate, emancipatory, and culturally relevant data generation tool in non-Western

settings, emphasising critical self-reflection as imperative for transformative change, and valuing Participatory Action Learning as an inclusive, democratic approach to complex, cross-institutional problem-solving in the Global South. We further acknowledge the potential that this project has to expand the understanding of engaged scholarship across disciplines, so as to realise epistemic justice. As the project team, we respectfully suggest the following future actions:

1. Adopt Decolonial and Collaborative Methodologies

Implement PALAR methodology to ensure a democratic, caring, and collaborative process for co-creating knowledge (Wood & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013). This approach emphasises shared power and a 'ground up' development of curriculum content, thereby affirming African knowledge as scientific and significant, equal to other global knowledges (Alem, 2019; Hountondji, 2009).

2. Centre African Identity and Relationality

Establish dedicated 'incubation spaces' in the form of a global institute that would encourage self-introspection, deep connection, and vulnerability through shared storytelling to prevent the alienation often found in colonial academic settings. These spaces should be grounded in the lived ethic of Ubuntu, which supports individual flourishing within a collective and fostering "relationship-centred resilience" (Anofuechi & Klaasen, 2024; Van Breda, 2019).

3. Foreground Indigenous Knowledge Practices

Acknowledge ancestral roots and historical strength by foregrounding African cultural practices into scholarly gatherings, such as using iingoma (songs) and izibongo (praise poems) (Chen, 2025; Mvenene, 2024). This process facilitates critical consciousness, cognitive liberation, and a reclaiming of narratives that connect scholars to their past for future guidance (Masango, 2006).

4. Disrupt Neo-Liberal Academic Norms

Challenge competitive practices like the 'publish or perish' mantra and extractionist research. Prioritise collaborative knowledge production for collective ownership and jointly planning social interventions based on research findings together with marginalised communities. This would move away from individualistic, careerist approaches.

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