The focus of AJHECE is Community Engagement and Development Research addressing topics on social injustice, poverty, corruption, inequality, unemployment and epistemic injustice, among other social and economic issues.

The main aim of AJHECE is to contribute to building a body of knowledge on Community Engagement (CE) for the African continent. The journal aims to publish and report on a wide range of aspects relating to Community Engagement and Community Development in Southern Africa, the region and elsewhere, with a strong focus on research and praxis. The journal's publications will reflect the diversity of practice in Community Engagement and the diversity of voices that participate in the co-creation of knowledge for individual, community and societal well-being. The journal actively seeks out international dialogue within the global South and partnerships between the global South and the global North that provide perspectives on and for Community Engagement in South Africa and the rest of the African region. By providing a forum for researchers, scholars, practitioners (community and institutional) and policy makers, the key objectives of AJHECE are to:

- Contribute to the body of knowledge on CE produced in Africa; encouragement of the African voice and voices from the global South in general, which may aid in combating epistemicide and marginalising alternative knowledge paradigms at higher education institutions.

- Grow community engagement as a discipline with philosophies, theories and praxis relevant to the African context, and a practice that contributes to the various dimensions (social, economic, cultural, psychological, spiritual, and political) of human and community development.

- Embed community engagement in all activities of the university, especially research, and signal the importance of scholarly work on community-university partnerships.

- Advance collaborative research methodologies, especially community-based participatory research (CBPR), where communities and academics are knowledge co-creators and collaborators in research practice and knowledge dissemination. This kind of research, which values the input of and produces knowledge for and with local communities, can contribute to the process of decolonisation of universities in Africa.

- Provide a space for professional development, discourse and debate on community engagement and sharing knowledge through the scholarship of engagement in the African context, the global South and partnerships with the global North that provide perspectives on and for Community Engagement in South Africa and the rest of the African region.

- Incorporate an author and young editorial board members support programme to encourage new authors in the field to establish themselves as scholarly writers and a new generation of editorial board members.

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Liberatory classrooms: Reimagining teaching, learning and research through community engagement

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The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn (Alvin Toffler)

In Europe universities have stood for continuity and conservation; in Africa universities are powerful instruments for social change (Eric Ashby)

Learning is a lifelong process. In other words, the whole of life is a learning process. Firstly, learning requires an *awareness* that it is a lifelong process and, secondly, every human being should be *open* to learning. And when we are open to learning, then we are also open to unlearn and relearn. The discipline-based format of higher education, however, predominantly educates students for a career, a living, and not for life. Compartmentalised academic disciplines and inflexible institutional cultures preclude unlearning and relearning. The potential for individual, collective and organisational 'learning, unlearning and relearning' is lost within this polarising framework of higher education.

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks (1994) argues that the classroom is the most radical space of possibility within the academy. Teaching, she asserts, is a performative act. Classrooms, therefore, are capable of change: they can become sites of democracy and reciprocity, where both students and teachers contribute to one another's learning. In her reflections on the possibility of the classroom, hooks draws inspiration from Paulo Freire's (1972) critique of traditional classroom structures underpinned by the *banking model* of education, whereby teachers deposit information into the minds of students who are seen as empty vessels. This model, Freire argues, fails to develop *critical consciousness*: the growing awareness of and commitment to challenging oppressive structures around us (Freire, 1972, p. 73).

Freire's *problem-posing education,* an alternative to the *banking model*, is based on the recognition that people are not empty vessels, but conscious beings actively engaged with the world. In this model, teachers and students become critical co-investigators, exploring the issues of modern society through dialogue (Freire, 1972, p. 81). Problem-posing education also opens the possibility for transforming higher education itself, equipping students with the knowledge necessary to expand or challenge academic disciplines and institutional

cultures. Consequently, classrooms or learning spaces at universities can continue to reproduce oppressive structures or provide the conditions for their deconstruction.

On the African continent, classrooms have historically served as sites of oppression as colonial legacies continue to influence educational experiences. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2012) notes, part of the process of colonialism involved placing Europe as the beginning of history and knowledge, while simultaneously constructing the African continent as bereft of history and significance prior to European influence. wa Thiong'o (1986, p. 9) remarked:

> Berlin of 1884 [i.e., the partition of Africa into different colonised territories] was effected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom.

Conversely, education spaces may be filled with liberatory potential. Education may expand individual and collective capabilities, facilitating democratic spaces for knowledge generation and sharing (Sen, 1999, p. 42). This connection between liberation and education also comes forward in the writing of Julius Nyerere (1976, p. 6):

> Education has to liberate both the mind and the body of [hu]mans. It has to make [them] more of a human being because [they] are aware of [their] potential as human beings, and are in a positive, life-enhancing relationship with [themselves], [their] neighbour and [their] environment.

Education – specifically the dialogical processes of teaching and learning – may thus simultaneously reproduce injustice and provide the conditions for its critique, with the nature of the classroom space significant in determining its impact. A question thus emerges: *What is the classroom?* Learning does not only occur within the confines of traditional brick-and-mortar lecture halls. In fact, the most liberatory classrooms may fall outside traditional educational institutions, within community settings. South Africa's Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) emerging during apartheid provides a striking example of this kind of classroom. Led by Steve Biko, the BCM shifted the focus of the freedom struggle toward mental liberation, highlighting the need for a transformation of consciousness alongside political freedom. Biko argued that apartheid did not only produce material effects but also "spiritual poverty" among Black communities (Biko, 1987, p. 22).

Linda Hull (2017) argues that this 'spiritual poverty' functions as a kind of *hermeneutical injustice*, the distortion and marginalisation of Black histories, cultures, and knowledge under apartheid. In response, the BCM thinkers emphasised conscientisation and the reclamation of African identity, history, and ways of knowing (Gibson, 2011, p. 67). The BCM extended beyond university campuses, connecting students with broader community struggles in schools, townships, and beyond. This approach to higher education, rooted in epistemic and political liberation, fostered a sense of solidarity and a commitment to social transformation.

Currently, the inclusion of community engagement as a core mandate of higher education in South Africa, further challenges the traditional boundaries of the classroom, and this movement against and beyond boundaries could become a powerful transgression. Community engagement, when paired with a problem-posing approach to education, has the potential to nurture critical consciousness in students. This connection between the classroom and society – what Freire would call *praxis* – becomes transformative when community engagement is integrated into the learning process, rather than treated as separate from it. As the nexus between teaching and research, community engagement readily provides pathways to learn, unlearn and relearn through the relationships between students and academics; between academics and academics; between students and students and importantly between academics, students and communities outside of the university.

The integration of mutually beneficial community engagement relationships in learning processes may also reinforce dialogic and integral learning, where the university and local communities both grow from the experiences. This reciprocal learning process may challenge traditional models of education, emphasising the shared growth of students, academics and communities.

Overview of contributions in this issue

The papers comprising this issue demonstrate that learning through community engagement is not merely an academic exercise, but a transformative practice that shifts paradigms, fosters dialogue and innovation, and facilitates mutual learning.

Nigel Machiha opens this issue with a discussion of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme which pairs Rhodes University mentors with final year learners at marginalised high schools in Makhanda, South Africa. Drawing on the insights of the programme's former 'mentees', this research paper considers both the possibility and limitations Nine-Tenths holds as a vehicle for decolonising higher education and enhancing epistemological access – the ability to engage meaningfully with academic knowledge – of historically disadvantaged students. Machiha thus connects a community engagement programme to contemporary discourses on higher education decolonisation and the decentring of knowledge and ideologies produced in the Global North in teaching and research practices. Drawing on conversations with 12 former mentees, Machiha concludes that the programme plays a crucial role in increasing access to higher education, an important aspect of higher education transformation. This transformation, however, is incomplete. Machiha argues that, to ensure that decolonisation efforts go beyond surface-level changes, it is important for universities to implement meaningful and sustained curriculum transformations that genuinely reflect diverse epistemologies. In this reflection, Machiha reminds us that, although the reciprocal learning experiences enabled through community engagement mentoring experiences are significant, we must not turn our attention away from the ways in which traditional university classroom spaces may not be living up to their liberatory potential.

Grey Magaiza, Geoffrey Mukwada, Jesse Lutabingwa, and **Jerit Dube** turn our attention to how we can cultivate reciprocal learning in academic processes by presenting a methodological approach for collaboratively engaging youth in a study on social entrepreneurship in the rural community of Thibella, South Africa. The participatory approach to research described in this paper illustrates the practice of co-creating a context-specific youth development approach. The paper details a variety of creative research techniques such as storytelling, collage making and photovoice, that serve to enhance data collection in engaged research. This paper highlights the importance of community-university partnerships (CUPs) in framing new methodologies for community engagement and recommends that CUPs be embedded in community-informed knowledge generation processes. The authors argue that community-university partnerships, based on dialogue, mutuality, and respect for local knowledge, are key enablers for positive transformation. Through this process of reciprocity, collaborators – those associated with community *and* academic settings – learn from one another and give meaningful expression to liberatory knowledge democracy.

Lindsay Kelland's reflections on the SHAER-Storytelling for Health, Acknowledgment, Expression and Recovery-intervention extend the discussion of methodologies that cultivate liberatory 'classrooms'. Reflecting on SHAER's implementation in Makhanda, South Africa, Kelland argues that collaboration with local partners was not only desirable but essential, given the need to hold a space both constituted by women survivors of gender-based violence and directed toward supporting their mental health after trauma. Kelland identifies unexpected outcomes that reshaped her learning. Despite the intervention's aims, no 'trauma stories' were shared, and her collaborators did not primarily identify as victims or survivors. Instead, they centred their narratives on their roles as mothers and community carers. This focus on agency, particularly through the identity of motherhood, may resonate with African philosophies, where motherhood is often a source of power, agency, and social status. Based on these outcomes, Kelland proposes that SHAER can be reimagined not merely as a mental health intervention but as a transformative, critical service-learning course, oriented toward empowerment and participatory democracy. Importantly, she emphasises that SHAER need not be restricted to trauma recovery: in its broadest form, it can function as a model for critical conscientisation.

The paper by **Margaret Aringo** and **Odhiambo Kevin Odongo** from Tangaza University in Kenya is based on a community engagement study from a faith-based perspective. The study highlights how students from the Franciscan School of the Institute of Spirituality and Religious Formation at Tangaza University engage with the Kiambiu small Christian communities through service learning, and the importance of biblical teachings in the application of the pastoral cycle methodology in service learning preparation and implementation. This paper introduces the pastoral cycle, an innovative, contextually grounded methodology for service learning. Designed to deliberately link action and reflection, the pastoral cycle deepens students' understanding of social justice and enhances

their ability to collaborate with communities for transformative change. In this way, Aringo and Odongo's approach powerfully advances the development of critical consciousness from a faith-based perspective. This case study is a significant example of learning through engagement. Students do not just passively consume knowledge; they actively contribute to the community's development while reflecting on their own learning journey. This two-way process embodies the liberatory potential of the classroom as a site of democracy and reciprocity, where students and communities learn with and from one another from a faith-based perspective.

Adding further nuance to this discussion, in his review of *Bridging Knowledge Cultures: Rebalancing Power in the Co-construction of Knowledge* (2023, edited by Lepore, Hall, and Tandon), **Peter Clayton** turns our attention to the challenges faced by researchers and community partners in community-university research partnerships. The book under review addresses power dynamics in knowledge production and the core question of how to rebalance power between universities and communities in co-constructing knowledge. A key strength of the book, as noted by Clayton, is its diverse case studies from various regions, brought together to offer transferable lessons to the reader. Central to these insights is the reflection that learning in this way requires the valuing of multiple – context-specific but often connected – ways of knowing, relationships and dialogue in knowledge-making.

Concluding remarks

The contributions to this issue illuminate the powerful role that community engagement can play in reimagining teaching, learning and research as emancipatory practices. The diverse articles demonstrate that learning does not only occur within university walls, nor does it flow in one direction. Instead, liberatory classrooms, broadly conceived, are created wherever knowledge is co-produced, and reflection is inseparable from action.

By embracing community engagement as a core mandate, the capacity of individuals to be open to learning – to learn, unlearn and relearn – is promoted and enhanced. And our higher education institutions can help dismantle colonial legacies, cultivate platforms for mutual learning, and foster more democratic spaces. Yet, as several contributors remind us, realising this potential demands sustained, critical work, not only through community engagement initiatives and partnerships, but also through continuous self-reflection, and within our curricula, pedagogies, and institutional cultures.

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Analysis of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme's role in decolonising higher education in Makhanda

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Abstract

This research critically examines the potential and limitations of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme at Rhodes University as a tool for decolonising higher education and enhancing epistemological access for historically disadvantaged students in Makhanda, South Africa. Initiated in 2016, the programme targets Grade 12 learners from under-resourced, no-fee schools, aiming to increase their chances of entering higher education. While the programme has successfully improved Bachelor-level pass rates and local enrolment at Rhodes, this study argues that true access involves more than just university admission. Conducted in 2021, the study uses qualitative data from 12 in-depth interviews with former Nine-Tenths mentees at various levels of study, ranging from undergraduate to postgraduate. The paper explores how the programme facilitates epistemological access, defined as the ability to engage meaningfully with academic knowledge, and its role in the decolonisation of higher education. Findings reveal that while Nine-Tenths bridges the gap between secondary and tertiary education, students continue to face substantial challenges upon entering university, including socio-economic obstacles, language barriers, and feelings of alienation within a historically white institution. While the programme marks progress toward decolonisation, deeper institutional transformation is necessary to achieve epistemological equity and create a truly inclusive academic environment. This paper concludes with recommendations such as enhanced first year support systems, targeted socio-economic interventions, and curriculum reforms that embrace diverse epistemologies. By emphasising the need to move beyond mere access to ensure meaningful inclusion and success, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on decolonisation in South African higher education, and the urgent need for systemic transformation in historically exclusionary institutions.

Keywords: *Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme; access to higher education; historically disadvantaged students; decolonisation; epistemological access; community engagement*

Introduction

In the words of Sizwe Mabizela, Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University, "Our university is not just in Grahamstown [now Makhanda] but is also of and for Grahamstown [Makhanda]" (Rhodes University, 2019, p. 3). This statement reflects a redefinition of the university, requiring it to become more relevant to the Makhanda community (Westaway, 2019). This vision has driven the university's commitment to confronting the deep inequalities in the local education system, leading to the establishment of the Vice-Chancellor's Education Initiative, within which the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme plays a central role.

The Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme, initiated in 2016, seeks to address the stark disparities in educational access and outcomes as university students mentor learners from local no-fee schools, aiming to equip them with the tools necessary to succeed in higher education. The urgency of such initiatives is underscored by the reality that many young people in Makhanda's public schools face significant barriers to accessing institutions like Rhodes University (McCann et al., 2021). The programme's impact is evident in the marked improvement in Bachelor-level pass rates – a pre-requisite towards gaining a university entrance in South Africa – among the participating schools. The increase in Bachelor-level passes has in turn, increased the number of local students enrolling at Rhodes University (Westaway, 2021). The Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme has significantly improved physical access to higher education in Makhanda. For example, as Wilmot (2019) notes, in 2017, just a year after the programme's establishment, the three selected schools had increased their combined Bachelor-level passes from 16 to 52. Of these, 26 enrolled as full-time students and seven as part-time students at Rhodes University. However, while these quantitative gains are significant, they raise important questions about the nature and quality of access being provided.

This study therefore investigates the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme at Rhodes University, evaluating its effectiveness in fostering epistemological access and contributing to the decolonisation of higher education in Makhanda. Drawing on interviews with 12 former mentees, the paper examines student transitions to university and identifies structural and institutional barriers that persist. While the programme has increased Bachelor-level pass rates and local enrolment, true access involves more than admission. It requires enabling students to engage meaningfully with knowledge in an inclusive academic environment. In a historically white institution like Rhodes University, this includes institutional transformation and curriculum reform to support diverse epistemologies.

The first part of the paper presents literature reviewed and the theoretical framework guiding the study. This is followed by a description of the study which includes research design and methodology, participants, data collection and analysis, findings and lastly, the conclusion and my final thoughts.

Literature review

Histories of higher education in South Africa

The history of South African universities reflects the broader struggles of colonialism, segregation, and apartheid. From their colonial origins to their role in apartheid and post-apartheid transformation, these institutions have been sites of oppression and spaces of resistance (Badat, 2010). Understanding this history is essential for addressing the ongoing challenges in the higher education sector and for building a more equitable system.

Early South African universities, such as Rhodes University (1904) and the University of Cape Town (1829), were modelled on British institutions and primarily served white elites (Ashby, 1964; Badat, 2010). These universities entrenched Eurocentric knowledge systems, reinforcing colonial values (Maylam, 2005, 2016, 2017). Rhodes University, alongside other historically white institutions like the University of Cape Town, the University of Natal, and the University of the Witwatersrand, became part of a group of 'liberal universities' that distanced themselves from the apartheid government's control over higher education (Bunting, 2006, p. 42). Despite apartheid legislation, these universities occasionally admitted black students, although access was still heavily restricted (Bunting, 2006, p. 43).

The apartheid era marked a pivotal moment for South African universities, particularly with the Eiselen Commission (1953) and the Bantu Education Act (1953), which sought to segregate and control the education of black South Africans. Hendrik Verwoerd, often seen as the architect of apartheid, argued that black education should serve the needs of the white economy, famously stating that "What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?" (Basebenzi, 2019, p. 1). This policy led to the establishment of underfunded historically black universities (HBUs) and Bantustan institutions designed to produce a subservient labor force (Ajayi et al., 1996). Lazar (1987) and Davies (1996) note that the apartheid government intentionally stifled these institutions, ensuring they could not operate autonomously and limiting their intellectual capacity.

Historically black universities, like the University of Fort Hare (founded in 1916), were initially established to provide higher education to black South Africans. However, under apartheid, these institutions were constrained to comply with segregationist policies. Despite these limitations, universities like Fort Hare became centres of resistance, fostering leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe, and playing an instrumental role in anti-apartheid activism (Bunting, 2006). The 1976 Soweto Uprising, sparked by the imposition of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction, was a direct protest against the Bantu Education system and signified broader dissatisfaction with apartheid education (Christie & Collins, 1982).

Post-1994, the democratic transition led to significant reforms aimed at addressing the injustices of the past by integrating segregated institutions, increasing access for historically disadvantaged students, and promoting African-centred, socially responsive

curricula (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2004; Jansen, 2004). These efforts reflect ongoing attempts to decolonise the university and democratise knowledge production in South Africa. However, as predicted by Ashby (1966), the impact of colonialism and apartheid would continue to affect South African universities, with persistent challenges related to funding, access, and institutional culture.

The post-apartheid transformation of higher education, and the role of community engagement

The post-apartheid era therefore required significant efforts to increase access to higher education and transform curricula to reflect the realities, languages, and experiences of the majority of South Africans. Successive governments have made attempts to reform the education sector (Badat, 2010), with the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (Department of Education, 1997) advocating for a socially responsive, equitable, and inclusive higher education system. This policy emphasised the democratisation of knowledge production and the integration of community engagement into the core functions of universities, elevating it from a peripheral 'community service' to a scholarship of engagement (Department of Education, 1997; Bhagwan, 2018). Initiatives like the Community Higher Education Service Partnerships (CHESP) further supported this alignment of university activities with societal needs (Perold, 1998).

Community engagement programmes, such as the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme, have been pivotal in improving physical access to historically white institutions like Rhodes University. These programmes bridge the gap between universities and marginalised communities by offering academic support, mentorship, and pathways for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter higher education (Rhodes University, 2018). While successful in increasing physical access, questions remain about their effect on epistemic access, namely the ability of students to fully engage with and challenge the knowledge systems within universities (Morrow, 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

The 2015/2016 student protests in South Africa highlighted these issues, with students calling for the decolonisation of curricula and institutional structures to address historical injustices (Albertus, 2019). The protests underscored the tension between physical and epistemic access, as students from marginalised backgrounds often struggle to engage with knowledge production processes. This study builds on these discussions, exploring how students who transitioned to Rhodes University through community engagement initiatives navigate their position within a historically white institution. It examines whether such programmes improve not only physical access but also epistemic access, challenging colonial legacies and fostering inclusive knowledge production.

In response to the call for decolonisation, South African universities, including Stellenbosch University and the University of Cape Town, formed task teams and curriculum transformation committees (Le Grange et al., 2020). Rhodes University has also prioritised decolonisation in its Institutional Transformation Plan (RUITP) (Rhodes

University, 2018). Against this backdrop, the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme offers a valuable case study for examining the possibilities and challenges of decolonising higher education at the local level. This paper evaluates the programme's effectiveness in not only increasing access but also promoting meaningful engagement with higher education, contributing to the broader discourse on decolonisation in South Africa's universities.

The Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme

Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme overview

The Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme is a structured, community-based mentoring model in which Rhodes University student mentors work directly with Grade 12 learners from local non-fee-paying public schools. These schools often face deeply rooted challenges including overcrowded classrooms, under-resourced learning environments, and a shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in critical subjects like Mathematics and Science.

Mentors are paired with mentees early in the academic year and engage in at least nine structured mentoring sessions, covering key topics such as time management, study strategies, goal setting, exam preparation, and university application advice. These sessions are carefully scaffolded and go beyond academic guidance, focusing also on emotional and motivational support. In many cases, mentorship relationships extend informally beyond the formal sessions, offering learners continued encouragement and role modelling throughout the school year. Nine-Tenths incorporates various stakeholders, including learners, schools, mentors, and programme coordinators, to provide a holistic support system for learners. Through this programme, learners also gain access to university-level resources, such as the Rhodes University Library, computer labs, and a memory card preloaded with educational content.

Laying the groundwork: Conditions giving rise to Nine-Tenths

Nine-Tenths emerged as Rhodes University sought to redefine its post-apartheid identity, transitioning from a historically insular institution to one more engaged with and accountable to the local community. This shift includes confronting the deep-rooted inequalities in Makhanda's education system. In response, the Vice-Chancellor's Education Initiative was launched to support historically disadvantaged, no-fee-paying schools in Makhanda by addressing systemic barriers to quality education. The Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme, introduced in 2016, is a key component of this initiative.

The programme aims to address educational disparities in Makhanda, particularly the challenges that prevent students from accessing tertiary education. Many learners in Makhanda's public schools face socio-economic and structural obstacles that hinder their ability to attend institutions like Rhodes University (McCann et al., 2021). Nine-Tenths targets the critical final school year, providing Grade 12 students with the tools they need to succeed. Co-managed by RUCE (mentor training) and GADRA Education (school liaison),

the programme prepares mentors, primarily Rhodes University students and some staff members, through structured training sessions. Mentors are tasked with supporting mentees academically, emotionally, and in planning for life after high school.

Possibilities and limitations of the programme

While decolonisation and epistemological access are not explicit goals of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme, they align with Rhodes University's broader transformation agenda. Nine-Tenths serves as an extension of the university, contributing to transformation through targeted, community-driven interventions that improve academic outcomes. It exemplifies university-community collaboration, focusing on knowledge co-production and empowerment, rather than charity or outreach. The programme has notably increased local access to higher education, particularly for students from historically disadvantaged schools in Makhanda.

Though Nine-Tenths cannot resolve all systemic issues in these schools, it provides critical support during a key academic year, and serves as a model for socially responsive higher education. However, it operates within structural constraints and cannot, alone, address deeper inequalities in the basic education sector. Its impact is significant at the individual level but relies on broader institutional transformation efforts. The need for further action to tackle entrenched issues in post-apartheid education is clear. The 2015–2016 student protests in South Africa underscored the urgency of decolonisation debates (Le Grange et al., 2020, p. 26). Following these protests, Minister of Higher Education Blade Nzimande called for universities to 'Africanise/decolonise' the curriculum (Le Grange et al., 2020, p. 26). However, there remains little consensus on what a decolonised higher education space should look like.

This study contributes to the growing literature on decolonising higher education by critically assessing mentorship programmes like Nine-Tenths in improving access for historically disadvantaged students. While much research focuses on curriculum reform, this paper emphasises the broader institutional and socio-economic factors that shape students' engagement with higher education. It also explores potential unintended consequences of initiatives like Nine-Tenths and distinguishes between access and epistemological inclusion, offering a nuanced perspective on decolonisation in practice.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is informed by decolonial theory and the concept of epistemological access. Decolonial theory provides a lens through which to critique the lingering colonial structures within the South African education system, highlighting how historical inequities continue to shape educational access and outcomes. Complementing this, epistemological access, as defined by Morrow (2009), emphasises that true access to higher education involves more than just physical entry; it requires the ability to engage meaningfully with the knowledge systems and academic practices

of the university. Together, these frameworks support an analysis of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme not only in terms of student support but also as a potential site of decolonisation and epistemological access within a historically exclusive institution.

Decolonisation of higher education

Decolonisation in higher education is a complex and contested concept, requiring a deep understanding of colonialism's ongoing impact. Le Grange (2020) highlights the need for South African universities to address their colonial pasts, while Fanon (1967) emphasises that decolonisation must be a collective process of liberation, not just individual freedom.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019) differentiates between colonisation, which involves territorial control, and colonialism, a broader epistemic project that erases indigenous knowledge, languages, and cultures, concepts he terms 'epistemicide,' 'linguicide,' and 'culturecide.' Mbembe (2016) builds on this, arguing that decolonisation requires a radical rethinking of knowledge systems to displace Eurocentric epistemologies and incorporate African and Global South perspectives. However, critics like Le Grange et al. (2020) warn of 'decolonial washing,' where institutions claim to engage in decolonisation without meaningful change. Tuck and Yang (2012) assert that decolonisation is 'not a metaphor' and must involve sustained, concrete actions addressing historical dispossession and systemic inequalities, rather than symbolic gestures that maintain institutional power dynamics.

Rhodes University exemplifies institutional attempts at decolonisation, particularly through its Institutional Transformation Plan (2019–2022) and further. The university aims to remove Global North ideologies from the centre of its curriculum, focusing on knowledge relevant to the Global South. This includes promoting indigenous languages in teaching and research and reorienting the curriculum to reflect the lived experiences of students. The university's plan also emphasises the need for epistemological access, ensuring that students engage meaningfully with knowledge and are active contributors to knowledge production, not just consumers (Rhodes University, 2018, 2019).

Epistemological access

Epistemological access is central to decolonising higher education. Morrow (2007, 2009) distinguishes it from physical access, emphasising that true engagement with academic knowledge requires active participation, not just enrolment. A responsive curriculum should support this by fostering deep learning and accommodating diverse student backgrounds.

However, there is no consensus on how to define or measure epistemological access. Scholars like Slonimsky and Shalem (2006) stress curriculum responsiveness, while Moll (2004) highlights the importance of aligning teaching with students' socio-cultural realities. Despite decolonisation efforts, students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds often experience alienation – feeling excluded from both the curriculum and institutional culture (Mann, 2001).

This idea can be linked to Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, which demonstrates how structural inequalities shape who is recognised as a credible knower within academic spaces. Fricker distinguishes between testimonial injustice, where individuals' contributions are undervalued due to prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, where marginalised groups lack the interpretive frameworks to make their experiences intelligible within dominant discourses. Applying Fricker's framework to higher education highlights how students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds not only face material barriers but are also epistemically marginalised, limiting their full participation in knowledge creation and engagement. Maniram and Maistry (2018) argue that institutions must actively support students in bridging knowledge gaps, as epistemological access cannot be assumed or left to individual effort. In sum, decolonisation requires more than widening access, it requires structural transformation to ensure all students can engage, participate, and succeed in academic spaces.

Research Design and Methodology

This paper explores the successes and limitations of the Nine-Tenths programme in relation to the broader mission of decolonisation and improving epistemological access in higher education. Although decolonisation and epistemological access are not explicit goals of the Nine-Tenths programme, they are central to Rhodes University's wider plans for institutional transformation. Throughout this study, the Nine-Tenths programme is viewed as an extension of Rhodes University itself, playing a critical role within the Makhanda education sector and holding potential to contribute beyond mere physical access to higher education.

Research objectives

The study was guided by two primary objectives:

i. To assess the potential and limitations of the Nine-Tenths programme in advancing the decolonisation of higher education in Makhanda.
ii. To evaluate whether the programme has been successful in providing epistemological access to the students involved.

Research design

The study employed a qualitative research methodology, using a case study design. This approach was selected because it provides an in-depth exploration of social phenomena within their natural settings, allowing for a rich and nuanced understanding of participants' experiences (Marshall, 1996, p. 524).

Participant selection

12 participants were selected through purposive sampling, chosen for their relevance to the research aims (Showkat & Parveen, 2017, p. 8). All were former Nine-Tenths mentees enrolled in tertiary education at the time of the study, primarily at Rhodes University, and able to reflect on the programme's long-term impact. Participants came from four historically disadvantaged Makhanda schools, Ntsika, Nombulelo, Mary Waters, and Khutliso Daniels, which partnered with the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme. Most were born or raised in Makhanda, and many were first-generation university students, offering valuable insights into the compounded challenges they faced.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews to explore participants' experiences transitioning from high school to university. A flexible interview guide ensured consistency while allowing participants to elaborate on topics they found important. Questions focused on academic preparedness, integration, and the impact of the Nine-Tenths programme, with examples including: "Were you planning to go to university before the programme?" and "How prepared were you for the university workload?".

To examine epistemological access and language transition, participants were also asked about their experiences using English as a primary medium of instruction and any feelings of alienation upon arrival at university. These interviews, conducted in person or online based on participant preference, lasted 45–60 minutes. All were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to identify patterns. The analytic process involved the following stages: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from Rhodes University's research ethics committee prior to the commencement of data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were briefed on the nature of the study, their rights to confidentiality, and their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. To protect anonymity, participants' real names were replaced with pseudonyms in all transcripts and reporting.

Role of community partners

Community partners, including representatives from the Nine-Tenths programme and local educational stakeholders, were consulted during the research design phase. Their input helped shape the research questions and ensure the study addressed relevant issues. However, their involvement was primarily advisory, and they did not play an active role in

data collection, analysis, or interpretation. While this study acknowledges the importance of community engagement, it did not fully embody the principles of engaged research, which typically involves deeper collaboration with community partners throughout the research process.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings drawn from the qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews. The analysis explores the potential and limitations of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme as a vehicle for decolonisation and epistemological access. To provide a structured evaluation, the findings are organised into key themes that shaped the students' experiences. The discussion begins with an examination of epistemological access, followed by an exploration of the programme's potential and limitations in advancing decolonisation and providing epistemic access.

The role of schooling in preparing learners for university

Many students face difficulties when it comes to adjusting from high school to a higher education institution. However, as seen in Miniram and Maistry (2018, p. 307), the level of preparedness to enter the university space is largely dependent on the type of high school the student attended. They further state that students who come from historically disadvantaged or ill-equipped schools tend to have a harder time adjusting to higher education. This view can be linked to that of Spaull (2015, p. 34), who argues that most poor students who emerge from disadvantaged backgrounds and dysfunctional schools tend to have gaps in their competence sets.

One of the interviewed students mentioned that "We didn't really have a teacher at Mary Waters for Grade 12, and for most of Grade 11. I managed to pass, but most people failed" (Chulumanco, 2021). In this instance the student was unable to be immediately admitted to Rhodes University and enrolled in GADRA Matric School, which assists students to improve their Grade 12 performance, to upgrade their marks for English and Mathematics. The reason for this was because, although they had passed, their marks did not meet the entry requirements to be accepted to study for a Bachelor of Commerce degree.

This student's experience shows that although the programme plays a positive role in improving the education sector in Makhanda, it is not able to fully address issues such as lack of teachers or infrastructure, which influence how equipped these students are to enter university and presents a possible barrier to university entry. In this instance the fault is not necessarily with the programme and has more to do with the education sector of the town. The student's experience also shows that although the number of Bachelor-level passes have increased in Makhanda, this does not automatically mean that these students will be accepted to Rhodes University, nor does it mean they will meet the entry requirements for their intended degree.

Community engagement programmes, like Nine-Tenths, play an important role in supporting students who face systemic barriers to higher education, yet they can only do so much within the confines of the existing structures. While these programmes may help individual students improve their academic performance or gain access to resources and mentorship that they would not otherwise have, they are often unable to address the underlying structural inequities that persist within the education system. These systemic barriers, such as underfunded schools, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of qualified teachers, continue to hinder students from disadvantaged backgrounds. As a result, while these community programmes can assist in providing immediate solutions for students, such as helping them meet university entry requirements, they are unlikely to bring about lasting change unless they also engage with and challenge the broader institutional and policy-level issues. Programmes that focus on advocacy, policy change, and systemic reform, in addition to academic support, would be necessary to truly dismantle the barriers that prevent equal access to higher education for all students. Without addressing these structural issues, such programmes may inadvertently reinforce the very systems they aim to alleviate.

Mentor-mentee relationships

It has been established that the programme has played a significant role in increasing the number of local entrants admitted to Rhodes University. However, it is important to look at what happens to these students once they physically access the institution. 10 of the 12 students interviewed had difficulties adjusting to higher education and felt underprepared to fully engage with the content and to fully participate in their degree programme.

This section focuses on mentor-mentee relationship. The relationships are nurtured during the Grade 12 year, and after, when the students are admitted into Rhodes University. One of the interviewed participants stated that:

My mentor was perfect for me I guess, she was what I needed, and she was there every time I needed something. Besides the Nine-Tenths hours, she was there on Whatsapp, I could ask her anything or talk to her about something.

The data gathered suggests that mentors play a key role in preparing these students for university. What can be seen from the data collected was that there were varying levels of preparedness and that this was partly due to the type of relationship the mentor and mentee have. Those who maintained regular contact with their mentors were able to communicate beyond the structures of the programme and it was through these extra sessions that they were able to discuss the adjustment to university. A good mentor-mentee relationship provides many benefits and allows the mentee to fully benefit from what the programme has to offer. However, being paired with a mentor that is either disinterested or not fully engaged puts the prospective student at a disadvantage.

The interviewee cited above, who had a good relationship with his mentor, explains the relationship as follows: "Sometimes we would have sessions, where we would talk about our lives and stuff. So, it was more of friendship and family, rather than just schoolwork" (Chulumanco, 2021). This is an important statement, because it shows that some mentors and mentees established good relationships, and this positively impacted their academic and personal lives during matric.

Another interviewee stated that:

When I was writing my supplementary exams, I kept on meeting my mentor, she was the one supporting me, she even paid for my registration. She encouraged me, so that I could write the exams and get back my funding.

In this instance the student had failed their first year at university, because they could not submit their assessments due to their home environment. As a consequence, the student lost their funding. However, with the assistance of their former Nine-Tenths mentor, they were able to pass their supplementary exam, and able to successfully appeal to get their funding back.

Although keeping contact with one's mentor, does not automatically guarantee academic success, it can have a positive impact in other ways that contribute to making adjustment to university easier. The above statement also shows how limited the programme may be in addressing the core issues of inequality in Makhanda. From the data gathered, nine of the 12 students mentioned that they no longer speak or have any contact with their previous mentors, despite being enrolled in the same institution. Only three of the interviewed participants were still in contact with their mentor, however even amongst these students there were varying levels of communication between the mentor and mentee.

The relationships between mentors and mentees, as described by the interviewees, highlight the significant role that mentorship can play in providing emotional and academic support during critical times, such as during matriculation and university adjustment. While staying in contact with a mentor does not automatically guarantee academic success, the support and encouragement offered by mentors can provide students with a sense of stability and motivation. In the case of the student who was assisted through their supplementary exams and successfully regained their funding, the mentorship relationship played a crucial role in helping the student navigate personal and academic challenges. This highlights that mentorship programmes can offer invaluable support in areas beyond the academic field, such as providing emotional encouragement and assisting with practical issues where possible.

However, as the interviewee's experience also suggests, the programme may still fall short in addressing the core issues of inequality that students confront in Makhanda. While mentorship can offer critical individualised support, it is not sufficient to tackle the broader structural and systemic challenges, such as the socio-economic disparities and lack of resources in the community, that hinder students' ability to succeed academically. Mentorship can provide a crucial safety net, but it cannot replace the need for systemic

change in education and socio-economic conditions. Thus, while the programme offers a positive impact on individual students, it must be seen as part of a larger, ongoing conversation about addressing the deeper inequalities that affect students' access to education and their ability to thrive in higher education.

Many students struggle with the adjustment to university, and those that come from historically disadvantaged schools tend to have a harder time adjusting not only to a different environment, but also to new ways of learning and teaching. One participant stated that "It was a very difficult year for me, since like as a first-year student, I was even planning on dropping out last year … even to deregister, because of the situation that was facing because of COVID-19, having no devices to do the work" (Thandiwe, 2021). In this instance the student had struggled with the adjustment to university and was unable to both physically access the institution and epistemologically access the curriculum, because they did not have devices to do so.

Another interviewee who had failed their first year at Rhodes University provided a similar response. The student stated that:

> When we started experiencing COVID-19, we were forced to go back home. At home where I live there is no electricity, I come from the 'squatter camps'. I was left behind with my work. As a result of that, I failed to submit lots of assignments and tests, since I didn't have access to electricity. Due to that in first semester I failed politics and legal theory, the only module that I passed was isiXhosa.

The student cited above was a local student from Makhanda, who was initially living in the campus residences. As a result of the pandemic, she had to leave her university residence early in the academic year. Due to her going back home, where her household did not have electricity, she was unable to participate in the fully virtual academic year, and this largely contributed to her failing. In this example we can gather that just because the student is institutionally enrolled in an institution does not automatically mean that they will be able to access the institution epistemologically or even physically. From the above two interviews, being unable to physically access the institution was a hindrance to obtaining epistemological access. The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools and universities to rapidly transition online, exposing deep inequalities in access to technology, data, support, and highlighting urgent issues like food insecurity among students from poorer households.

Another student who had a difficult time said, "I even thought of dropping out, because I was not doing well academically, and I felt alone" (Mbali, 2021). This statement reflects some of these students' sentiments once they enter this space. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the experiences of the students after they have completed the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme and gained access to Rhodes University, in line with the goals of the programme. Many of the interviewed participants stated that they had or are still having issues adjusting to Rhodes University, be it academically, socially and economically. Students who are not adequately prepared for the transition to higher education are often not able to fully engage with the content that they are learning. This speaks to the notion

of epistemological access, because simply being in the institutional space does not equate to epistemological access. These students need to be able to meaningfully engage with the content to truly benefit from their education.

Language

Rhodes University, in the RUITP, states that decolonising entails the decentring of knowledge away from a Global North centered curriculum towards knowledge that is produced in the Global South. Decolonisation according to the University includes the promotion of indigenous languages for teaching, learning and research, alongside English (Rhodes University, 2018). Most of the learners from the selected schools have isiXhosa and Afrikaans as their first language.

Although these students are not first language English speakers, they are able to read, write and communicate in the language. However, there were varying levels of fluency when it came to the use of English. One student stated that "I wrote my exams in English, but when I started Grade 8, I was doing everything in Afrikaans, and then I changed from Grade 9" (Lungile, 2021). In some instances, the use of English presented a barrier which impacted how much of the content they were able to understand. What this means is that unlike some of their fellow classmates, they did not only have to adjust to a different institutional space, but they also had to adapt to having English as the primary language of instruction, learning and writing.

The research participants were affected differently by this adjustment, with some finding it relatively easy to make the switch, whilst some struggled to adjust to this change. The students who struggled with the adjustment reported that the level of English required at university, far exceeds what was expected of them at high schools. For example, one interviewee stated that:

> English from high school is so different, when you compare to the one at university. First of all, you get pressured that your English has to be good, so that your lecturers, can get what are saying. At high school you can explain something in Xhosa and the teachers will not mind. Here [Rhodes], you have to talk everything in English, it is compulsory for you to speak English, while at high school you had the opportunity to explain something that you wrote in English, in isiXhosa.

Another participant stated that "for one assignment I had the communist manifesto, and I had no idea what was going on, and had to read it a number of times to understand what was going on" (Thobile, 2021). In these two responses what can be observed is that although the students are able to understand and speak English, in some instances for these students the use of English as the primary language at institutional level presents a possible barrier to their learning, understanding, and writing, which can impact how much content they are able to understand. This also impacts their ability to effectively communicate their understanding of the subject in assignments. These language-related

barriers align with Fricker's (2007) notion of testimonial injustice, where students' contributions are undervalued due to prejudices about linguistic competence. Moreover, many students face hermeneutical injustice, as the dominant academic discourse does not sufficiently accommodate their linguistic and cultural realities, limiting their ability to fully participate in meaning-making processes.

There have been attempts at the institution to incorporate isiXhosa into coursework, with some departments allowing for learners to submit some of their work in isiXhosa. At face value, this initiative seems to be beneficial for local learners who might have trouble understanding the coursework. However, from the data gathered, many of these students were aware that there was an option to submit in another language but had decided to not use this mechanism. When this was probed further, one learner mentioned that their readings were in English, meaning that they would have to translate it into isiXhosa themselves, and further stated that they were not fully confident in their written Xhosa to submit an assignment in this language.

What can be gathered from the data is that students who experienced the most issues when it came to this adjustment were those in the Humanities faculty. Students interviewed from the Pharmacy and Commerce faculty stated that English was not an important issue for them when it came to their discipline. However, this is not to say that these students were completely unaffected by the transition to the use of the language. The issues faced by these students were more cultural and institutional, in terms of their surroundings, and this will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

The Humanities faculty at Rhodes University requires extensive reading and weekly essay writing. Some of the previous Nine-Tenths mentees in the faculty experienced difficulties with grasping the knowledge, due to them not having a full grasp over the use of English. One of the participants described her difficulties as follows:

> When I first got here it was not easy at the beginning of the year. Meeting people from different places was intimidating, especially last year before COVID-19 when we were still attending face to face classes. We used to do a debate in politics, and you could hear the accent of other people and you would also feel intimidated. I would wish I was like that person. I would be not saying anything because of my accent.

What can be seen in this instance is that some students may struggle to adjust to the different environment, because of a language barrier. Although these students would be able to understand and converse in English, they are unable to fully engage with the work and their fellow peers. While there have been efforts made to accommodate students, who might want to submit in another language, only one of the participants had submitted in their home language. The participants cited various reasons for not utilising this mechanism, however the common theme was that they were not comfortable with the use of a language other than English for their submissions. One interviewee explained: "The course outline is in isiXhosa, and they told us we could submit in another language, but the readings were in English" (Thandiwe, 2021). In this instance the student stated that they did not make use of

the option to submit in another language, because it was difficult to translate the readings themselves, and they were not fully confident enough to submit in isiXhosa.

Institutional culture

Although it has been a few decades since South Africa became a democracy, except for allowing entry of non-white students into historically white institutions, the education system has not changed (Albertus, 2019). The author further states that the social structures of colonialism and white privilege still manifest in the everyday experience of non-white university students. One of the interviewed participants stated that:

> For me socially, I was really struggling to make friends. I was staying in res. In my class there were people from Makhanda, but I did not know them because they went to the schools in the township, and I went to a coloured school. I ended up hating res, packed my things and just go home. I asked myself do I really belong here.

In this instance, what can be seen is that, although Rhodes University is becoming more diversified and inclusive for local students, there are still some students who feel alienated in this space. These findings reflect what Mbembe (2016) describes as the persistence of coloniality within university spaces, where institutional cultures continue to centre Eurocentric norms and marginalise students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite increased enrolment, the symbolic and cultural structures of the university often remain unchanged, reinforcing feelings of exclusion and alienation among local students.

 As mentioned earlier, improving accessibility to the institution is a step in the right direction when it comes to decolonising higher education. However, for the space to fully become decolonised, the transformation that is needed goes beyond simply improving access. This transformation needs to be institutional and one that caters to the lived realities of these students. Institutional culture plays a crucial role in shaping students' experiences within higher education, particularly for those from historically marginalised backgrounds.

While increasing access to institutions like Rhodes University is an important step toward transformation, it does not automatically create an environment where all students feel included and valued. The lived experiences of students, as indicated by the above student, highlights the complexities of social integration within the university space. Feelings of alienation, isolation, and a lack of belonging can have a significant impact on students' academic performance and overall well-being. This suggests that institutional transformation must go beyond demographic diversity and address the deeper cultural and structural barriers that continue to exclude certain groups.

While the transition from secondary school to university is often challenging to most students, it is more especially difficult for students from previously marginalised communities. For these students, a truly decolonised institution would not only focus on who is allowed entry but also on how students experience and navigate the university space once they are there. This means critically engaging with curriculum content, teaching

practices, residence life, and social integration efforts, to ensure that all students feel a sense of belonging. Efforts to shift institutional culture should include creating safe spaces for open dialogue, implementing mentorship programmes that bridge social divides, and actively working to dismantle the lingering effects of colonialism and privilege within the university environment. Without such changes, the diversification of higher education remains superficial, and students from marginalised backgrounds will continue to face challenges in fully engaging with and benefiting from their university experience.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research paper presents the findings from a study that evaluated the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme's potential and limitations as a vehicle for decolonising higher education and enhancing epistemological access at Rhodes University in Makhanda. The Nine-Tenths programme has improved physical access to higher education, but challenges remain in ensuring epistemological access. Students continue to face socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural obstacles.

True decolonisation requires structural changes to dismantle persistent inequalities. Programmes like Nine-Tenths are a starting point, but deeper institutional transformation is needed for lasting impact. To ensure that decolonisation efforts go beyond surface-level changes, it is important for universities to implement meaningful and sustained curriculum transformations that genuinely reflect diverse epistemologies.

While the incorporation of isiXhosa into certain departments at Rhodes University is a step towards linguistic inclusivity, it does not necessarily equate to decolonisation. True decolonisation requires a fundamental shift in how knowledge is produced, valued, and disseminated within academic spaces. This means not only integrating indigenous languages but also centring African knowledge systems, histories, and ways of knowing in teaching and research.

One way to move beyond 'decolonial washing' is for lecturers to actively design linguistically inclusive programmes that allow students to engage with content in their home languages while also critically analysing dominant knowledge structures. This could involve offering multilingual academic support, encouraging students to produce work in indigenous languages where possible, and including texts by African scholars in core reading lists. Additionally, fostering an environment where students feel empowered to challenge Eurocentric frameworks can contribute to a more genuinely decolonised learning space. Without these deeper transformations, curriculum changes risk being tokenistic rather than truly transformative.

The data collected highlights that while Nine-Tenths has been effective in facilitating physical access to higher education, it falls short in ensuring comprehensive epistemological access, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, many students lacked access to necessary resources at home, such as laptops, stable internet connections,

and conducive learning environments, these factors significantly impacted their academic performance. Some students even failed courses due to these challenges.

The data also reveals that many students struggled in their first year of study, feeling underprepared for university life. To address this, Rhodes University should provide additional support during the first year to help students adjust and feel less isolated. A strong support system could positively impact their academic success and reduce the sense of alienation.

Limitations of the Study and Areas for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme in promoting access to higher education, it has some limitations. The small, homogenous sample focused solely on former mentees at Rhodes University. Including perspectives from non-participants, mentors, faculty, and programme administrators would provide a fuller picture of the programme's impact. Future research could also explore long-term outcomes such as graduation rates, employment, and continued engagement with decolonisation. Comparative studies with similar mentorship programmes at other institutions would help assess the scalability and adaptability of the Nine-Tenths model.

Final Thoughts

The 2021 research findings show that while the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme has improved physical access to Rhodes University, it falls short in ensuring epistemological access. Socio-economic challenges continue to hinder students' academic success, highlighting the need for broader support. The programme prepares students for entry but does not adequately support them once enrolled.

True decolonisation requires more than access, it demands structural change to create an inclusive academic environment. It must remain a transformative goal, not reduced to token efforts or 'decolonial washing'. As current data shows, significant barriers persist. While the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme is a positive step, it is not a complete solution. Rhodes University must go further to ensure all students can thrive, thus fully embodying the values of decolonisation and becoming not just 'in' Makhanda, but truly 'of' it.

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Youth Engagement Methods: Community-University Partnerships for Social Entrepreneurship in Resource Poor Communities

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Abstract

The university can be an enabler of positive transformation by engaging with various communities. By describing a methodological process followed in a doctoral study, this paper presents a participatory research approach with youth in a resource-poor context to illustrate methodological pathways of inclusion. The paper also problematises the notion of social entrepreneurship and stresses the definitional challenges associated with the term. This is important to show the possibility of expanding the scholarly footprint of social entrepreneurship and universities' important role and options in framing new approaches and methodologies within community university partnerships. A methodological primer is presented to show the methodological process, embedded in qualitative participatory research, that informed the study. The methodological process is rooted in the participants' lifeworld and seeks to amplify local concerns and solutions. Community-university partnerships that respect aspirations and agendas of local communities inspired by collaborative, dialogical, transforming and respectful processes are identified in the paper as enablers of successful university-community engagements.

Keywords: *Participatory methodologies, community-university partnerships, youth engagement and social entrepreneurship*

Introduction

This paper illustrates a methodological approach for collaboratively engaging youth in a social entrepreneurship (SE) project. It explores a methodological approach applied in a doctoral study to demonstrate a youth engagement process in a rural area. The main research

question in this paper is: What methodological processes can social entrepreneurship ideation follow to enable youth engagement in resource-poor communities? To answer this question, the study applied a qualitative and participatory approach to buttress its methodological focus. This participatory approach is premised on an enactive research effort that captures and describes moments in the worldview of participating youths to craft an SE approach (Cargo and Mercer, 2008). The approach is assessed for its potential to evolve the methodological application of community-university partnerships (CUPs) with resource-poor communities. Effective and impactful CUPs for community engagement must be embedded in collegial, emergent and co-creative methodological applications supporting innovation and positive change.

The study is rooted in the work of Steyaert and Bachmann (2012), who note that SE research must be conducted with inclusive, fluid, and innovative methods to capture moments that enable transformative possibilities and strengthen stakeholder relationships. The methodological approach narrates a research process that creates opportunities for youth to identify transformative strategies rooted in SE and critically discusses the social ecology of youth in South Africa to position SE as a potential youth development approach. The paper begins with a description of the social ecology of youth and social entrepreneurship followed by the methodological context of youth engagement incorporating participatory research as a strategy. Details of the study and research process is presented next, followed by a discussion on the methodological implications for CUPS and finally the conclusion.

The social ecology of youth and social entrepreneurship

An understanding of the social ecology of youth and SE as an intervention strategy enables CUPs to collaborate on local agenda setting and problem solving effectively. This study critically engaged with the social ecology of youth within rural Thibella in Qwa Qwa, Eastern Free State Province, to address the youth situation in an economically marginalised area and suggest pragmatic solutions to young people's lived realities. Official documentation defines youth as individuals between the ages of 14 and 35, as officially enunciated in the youth policy documentation (Republic of South Africa, 2015). Despite a sound policy architecture in South Africa, the sad reality is that there seems to be an inadequate provision of social services for this demographic group. Mtwesi (2014, p. 39) bemoans that "the non-delivery on the part of government departments and youth institutions on their mandate with regard to youth programmes is a lost opportunity and represents a failure to fully comprehend the role youth play in society." Despite this, South Africa is regarded as a potential entrepreneurial leader and, in some contexts, the gateway into Africa due to having a comparatively advanced economy (Mail & Guardian, 2019).

But as a middle income African country, South Africa is plagued with vast levels of inequality and poverty, characterised by a stubbornly high poverty indices of 55% (StatsSA, 2017), a Gini Index of 0.70 (Radermacher & Herlyn, 2018), low national skill and education levels, a high HIV prevalence rate estimated at 19% (Zuma et al., 2022) and high crime

rate. Unemployment was pegged at 32.5% in the last quarter of 2020, and more than half of the youthful population is unemployed (StatsSA, 2021). In this context, a rising youth population accounts for slightly over 35% of the total population (StatsSA, 2021). It is in this context that the youth situation in South Africa can almost be described as distressed (Graham and Mlatsheni, 2021). The inability of young people to access employment poses the most significant threat and opportunity to South Africa's social stability. Consequently, there is an urgent need to identify pathways that enhance prosocial youth behaviour to mitigate a restless youth population. Therefore, social entrepreneurship is suggested as a pathway towards positive youth development.

However, Weerawaderna and Mort (2006, p. 21) note that although "… there has been an upsurge of interest in social entrepreneurship…a substantial controversy remains in the conceptualisation of the social entrepreneurship construct". This is because the concept means different things to different people and institutions so much so that SE is regarded as a contested concept (Choi and Majumdar, 2014; Slee et al., 2021) with multiple definitions emerging from public policy (Hjorth, 2013; Morris et al., 2021), cooperative movement (Thomas, 2006; Bose et al., 2019), entrepreneurship and business management (Mair and Marti et al., 2012), among others. Short et al. (2009, p. 162) assert, "a lack of a unified definition makes establishing the legitimacy of a field or construct difficult" which "hinders empirical research seeking to examine the antecedents and consequences of social entrepreneurship."

On the one hand, authors have perceived SE as a powerful poverty reduction tool (Ghauri, Tasavori, & Zaefarian, 2014), socio-economic upliftment of women (Datta & Gailey, 2012) and an institutional transformation tool (Nicholls, 2009). Saebi et al. (2019 p. 2) assert that "because of the heterogeneity in phenomena and approaches, the SE literature is challenging to grasp." This paper is located in this space, not only to illustrate the tensions characteristic of a field framing its nascent identity but also to affirm the importance of empirical processes embedded in functional CUPs that contribute to the application of SE in resource-poor communities. In seeking a comprehensive conceptual framework, the paper is guided by the pragmatic definition of Martin and Osberg (2007, p. 35), who stress that SE has three components:

i.   identifying a stable but inherently unjust equilibrium that causes the exclusion, marginalisation, or suffering of a segment of humanity that lacks the financial means or political clout to achieve any transformative benefit on its own;

ii. identifying an opportunity in this unjust equilibrium, developing a social value proposition, and bringing to bear inspiration, creativity, direct action, courage, and fortitude, thereby challenging the stable state's hegemony and;

iii. forging a new, stable equilibrium that releases trapped potential or alleviates the suffering of the targeted group, and through imitation and the creation of a stable ecosystem around the new equilibrium, ensuring a better future for the targeted group and society.

This definition conceptually breaks down the processes of transforming a social challenge using the SE approach to positively impact the evolution and collaborative intentions of CUPs and youth development. It creates methodological options, discussed below, that can be applied within CUPs to transform the youth context in resource-poor communities.

Methodological context of youth engagement

Youth poverty is a documented social problem in South Africa (Crause and Booyens, 2010), yet there is a dearth of approaches to deal with it. Youth engagement in this paper refers to the numerous methodological processes followed to collaborate with young people to support their development. These processes are embedded in young people's lived realities. Van Blerk (2023) stresses that knowledge and research are needed to accurately map how young people can play an increasingly important role in social development. In conducting this research, it became clear to prioritise moral and ethical concerns, as the livelihood outcome for research participants became intertwined with the research process. In a candid view of the horizons of qualitative research that inform this paper, Morrow (2007, p. 288) states:

> *I envision qualitative inquiry as a central tool for bridging community and academe by bringing research participants as co-researchers in matters that concern their everyday lives … Human agency and human rights would become increasingly important topics for inquiry, and research would be transformed into social action.*

To fully engage with young people, the study is situated in a participatory research approach as part of a research continuum to create opportunities that may potentially transform the lives of poor, rural and marginalised youth. This strategy is premised on three key principles, which are: firstly, an exploration of locally informed worldviews about and involving young people, secondly, co-constructing knowledge with them, and thirdly, using that knowledge to identify opportunities to transform their local contexts.

Participatory Research (PR) Strategy

PR may be described as an umbrella term for an overlapping range of research designs that facilitate direct collaboration with the groups affected by an issue (Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020). It is therefore a systematic inquiry designed to influence action and change with those directly affected by the situation. In this study, youth interested in the social upliftment of their community were identified to bridge the gap between research and practice while addressing social justice and change (Cargo and Mercer, 2008; Denvall et al., 2021). Scholars argue for a research paradigm that magnifies situated knowledge by considering local priorities and creating capacity-building pathways at the research site (Trickett et al., 2011; Ramanadhan et al., 2020). The PR perspective in this study relates to the empowerment outcome in which research becomes a means for capacity building and

social transformation in the research site (Vernooy and McDougall, 2003; Mertens, 2021). By delving into the life-stories of the research participants, together with them, the research collaborators were able to co-identify pathways to transform their livelihood strategies and enable enlightenment to the local conditions and identification of action pathways (Islam, 2020). Furthermore, this paper is guided by the belief that the generation and consumption of knowledge should not be independent of its use in planning and implementation. The SE aspirations of the youth are viewed as opportunities for future action in a resource-poor community.

The study and research process

The study was conducted during the period 2018–2019, and faculty approval to conduct the study had been obtained in 2017. PR is illustrated by the practice of co-creating a context-specific youth development approach that outlines SE-based interventions for rural marginalised youth. As a methodological pathway, the research used multiple qualitative techniques to engage with young people to:

- Explore youth actions at the local community level
- Identify opportunities for actions based on local development agendas

The steps above reflect a need to show a structured research process embedded in local communities' voices and agendas.

Study Location

Thibella is a village in the eastern Free State, located below the beautiful Drakensberg range of mountains. This village is situated in the Maluti-a-Phofung Municipality (MAP). It is one of the rural villages occupying tribal land administered by the Department of Land Affairs (Maluti-A-Phofung, 2016). The research participants describe Thibella as poor, isolated, and underdeveloped. This has primarily been attributed to the apartheid era, when QwaQwa was designated a Basotho homeland. Ramutsindela (2001) notes that the transformation and characterisation of a space as a Bantustan had negative connotations for its future development. Thibella formed part of a constellation of spaces negatively impacted by the unequal development due to the 'homeland' identity (Ramutsindela, 2001)

Sampling Strategy and Study Sample

The process of locating research participants is complex and involves preparatory work, which includes finding informants, making initial contact and developing rapport. As a result of an agreement between the researcher's university and the Department of Social Development (DSD), the researcher (first author) requested a meeting with the DSD to negotiate access to specific areas of QwaQwa. In many ways, Thibella was conveniently

selected to suit the research needs. Rather than use a singular criterion for choosing the research site, the inquiry adopted Goetz and LeCompte's (1984, p.77) criterion-based sampling to "establish the criteria, bases, or standards necessary for units to be included". Criterion-based sampling has similar qualities to purposive sampling, as the criteria are usually those that the researcher would have regarded as essential and critical for site selection. In this instance, the requirements for choosing Thibella is that it was part of a ward under one manager from the DSD, which was experiencing high incidences of youth poverty and was ultimately rural.

A priori criterion for the research participants in line with the national definition of youth (Policy document, 2015–2019) was chosen to enable selection based on criterion sampling. This criterion enabled a more manageable selection of participants, together with the criteria below:

- an understanding of English
- currently not participating in any government-funded initiatives
- a willingness to engage in new initiatives and projects
- be a South African citizen or permanent resident

A maximum of ten research participants were conveniently chosen from the site through snowball sampling. Patton (1990, p. 169) reaffirms this approach and rightfully notes that "qualitative enquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples, even single cases selected purposefully." Ten participants were sufficient to test the engagement methods with youth for whom "social exclusion is a daily experience" (Crause and Booyens, 2010. p. 6). Given the in-depth nature of the research, it was necessary to limit the number of participants to get a full description and analysis of the research context. An English language criterion was added to remove the need for a translator as the researcher was not conversant in the local Sesotho language.

Data Collection

This study used multi-modal data collection methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, photovoice, collage and storytelling to collect and analyse various perspectives and moments in the lives of young people in QwaQwa.

In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were used to understand the experiential and daily realities of youth poverty, marginality, and emergent challenges. This study used an open-ended interview approach modelled along Seidman's (2006) three interview process. Seidman (2006, p. 4) posits that interview:

provides access to the context of people's behaviour and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behaviour... Interviewing allows us to put behaviour in context and provides access to understanding their action.

In his presentation of the three stages, Seidman (2006) states that the first stage is where the researcher establishes the context of the participant's experience by making the participant's life history the focal point. To unlock conversations, collages (explained below) were used as a narrative enabler with the youth to get descriptions of their life histories. For this reason, the first interview gleaned much about their aspirations, current life situation, and, most importantly, where they position themselves within the interests of their communities.

The second interview focused on the aspects of the research participants' present experiences, and Seidman (2006) advocates encouraging the respondent to tell stories to elicit detailed information. Photovoice was then used as a dialogical method for engagement. The third interview, which happened towards the end of the research project, encouraged the participants to reflect on their understandings of their experiences. In the third interview, it was essential to understand how research participants regard possibilities before them and explore issues that arose during the research process. The three interview process forms part of a plural data collection method. It also ensures that each interview has a distinct purpose, ensuring that context, details and reflected meanings emerge during each interview (Seidman, 2006). All in-depth interviews were recorded on a digital tape recorder, transcribed, and the narrations given to the interviewees for verification and confirmation. In this study, all ten participants were engaged in three in-depth interviews following Seidman's (2006) three-stage interview process. After the first in-depth individual interviews, the urgency to create a group synergy necessitated a shift to focus group discussions, as explained below.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

This study applies the critical tenets of Touraine's (1981) focus group approach. FGDS, as discussed by Touraine, occur through three key stages: the first stage of constituting the groups, the second stage of meetings with interlocutors, and the third stage of self-analysis and interventions of the researchers. Hamel (2001, p. 343) defines FGDS as discussions that "aim at a collective definition of problems and at remedying them through concrete action formulated as the analysis unfolds." This study organised 12 FGDs with the cohort of research participants. Each FGD was about 45–60 minutes long, and all the FGDS were recorded and transcribed. The sections below explain how the FGDs were applied in this study.

Stage 1: Constituting groups

Touraine (1981) states that the FGD strategy entails forming groups that meet continuously to reflect on their experiences. In this study, participating youths formed a single group of ten individuals from QwaQwa, where youth poverty and the pathways SE may offer them were extensively discussed. In this space, young people could discursively engage with each other about possibilities within their community context to better their material positions and reduce their marginality. The first FGD was deliberately arranged immediately after the first in-depth interviews, as this interview enabled the researcher to generate common themes as a launchpad for further discussions. During the first FGD, confirming the commonalities emerging from the first in-depth interviews was essential. This study collaborated with youth whose experience of poverty enabled them to form a 'witness group' (Touraine, 1981) which can be a critical support base for each other as they manoeuvre their life situation.

Stage 2: Meeting with interlocutors

Touraine (1981) notes that during the second stage, the focus is on the recreation of a social situation. He goes on to state that, "rather than simply being confronted with questions, the group is forced to interact with actual partners who hold positive or negative positions to itself" (Touraine, 1981, p. 906). Based on the issues identified in stage one, two individuals with different ideas of community development and SE were invited to address the participants. The first was an established and wealthy businessman (Mr T), and the other (Ms P) was managing a non-governmental organisation in another part of Qwaqwa. These critical meetings with interlocutors were necessary as they highlighted different and contrasting views of development: How can poverty reduction be pursued in a resource-poor community like QwaQwa?

    The contestations enabled critical reflections as the two interlocutors engaged thoroughly with the youth on the nature and form of intervention applicable in their community. Mr T did not see value in a venture that did not make a profit, as it did not make business sense. On the other hand, Ms P saw sense in a limited profit and appealed to the youth to focus on the common good of their communities. At this stage of the FGDS, it was essential to ensure that the group engaged with real issues about what sort of social innovations they could be engaged in.

Photovoice Approach

This approach was spurred more by a need to identify needs in a participatory manner by collaborating with individuals who have expertise and insights into their communities (Wang and Burris, 1997). Wang, Cash and Powers (2000, p. 82) define photovoice as a "process by which people can identify, represent and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique". Rooted in both feminist and Freirean epistemologies,

photovoice is "a participatory research approach that creates spaces and opportunities for marginalised voices to be heard" (Plunkett, Leipert and Smith, 2013, p. 2). Photovoice in this study was used to reduce the epistemological silence of young people and to enhance engagement possibilities. The study used the SHOWed method (Wang and Burris,1997), which is a questioning technique used during the FGD to enable the participants to describe their pictures. SHOWed is guided by the following questions to facilitate the discussion, and these are:

i.   What do you **s**ee happening here?
ii. What is really **h**appening here?
iii. How does this relate to **o**ur lives as young people?
iv. **W**hy does this situation exist?
v.   How could this image **e**ducate the community?
vi. What can we **d**o about it?

While this process was overly discursive and descriptive, the six simple questions above allowed the research participants to offer critical and embedded narratives of their situation. Like Wang and Burris (1997), this study also had three goals when the photovoice approach was used:

- To enable research participants to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns.
- To promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues.
- To catalyse hope in a resource-poor community to illustrate possibilities before them.

The rest of this section will discuss how these goals were used to engage participants through the photovoice approach.

Goal 1: Research participants record and reflect on the community's strengths and concerns

While the collages were about the research participants, their life experiences, and their narratives, the photovoice was about how they viewed their community. Disposable cameras were introduced during a group session. The researcher explained how they are used and their importance as a tool to achieve Goal 1. During the camera orientation workshop, the research participants also received training on using and handling the cameras. One of the noticeable hallmarks of the photovoice approach is to "entrust cameras to the hands of people to enable them to act as recorders and potential catalysts for change in their communities" (Wang and Burris, 1997, p. 369). It was agreed with the participants that

after 21 days the cameras would be returned for developing the photographs. The decisions to take or not to take a picture mirror the rhythmic patterns of a community's way of life. Getting an insider view was critical to appreciate the realities of research participants. The activity below determined the photographs:

Take pictures that show your community's challenges, assets (both tangible and intangible) and opportunities.

This research stage was critical as it gave the youth a space and an opportunity to break from the monotony of interviews and confirm their developed social moralities. The following section outlines how the study sought to achieve goal 2 of the photovoice approach.

Goal 2: To promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues

Goal 2 created critical dialogues to enable youth participants to analyse their social context (Warne, Snyder and Gadin, 2012). Informed by Wang and Burris (1997), FGD nine and ten were done to enable the research participants to engage in conversations about the images they had taken. This was very important as it ensured the research participants could situate truth claims from their experiential standpoints (Stoezler and Yuval-Davis, 2002). Informed by the SHOWed method, participants actively discussed their photographs.

This study adopted a three-stage process of analysis as suggested by Wang and Burris (1997) and forms an essential framework of selection, contextualising or storytelling, and codifying. The first stage, selecting, was characterised by the participants picking out pictures to be discussed using the SHOWed method above. This exercise pre-empted the framework's second stage, contextualising or storytelling. It was important for the participants to narrate the meanings of their pictures in the group, write captions for them, and allow robust discussions to occur regarding the prioritised selected pictures whose stories were being told. Wang and Burris (1997) argue that photographs alone outside the context and voices of the takers contradict the essence of photovoice. To generate the rich contextual and narrative data, it was necessary to allow discourse around the multiple meanings of some photographs, coupled with the challenges of writing inscriptions on them. The third and final stage was dependent on and directly resulted from the second phase, codifying. Codifying laid the groundwork for the preliminary analysis of the participants' needs for their community. A pairwise ranking was also accompanied by codifying, and the participants could select the most critical photographs by merely putting a number from 1 to 5 on each picture. The cumulative total from all ten research participants was then used to rank the importance of the photograph.

Life-History Collage

The researcher used the life history collage to critically explore how the research participants position themselves in their social spheres, their inherent aspirations and strategies to highlight their survival competencies. Van Schalkwyk (2010, p. 678) defines a collage as a:

> poster or visual representation in which the participant makes use of photos, pictures and cuttings (also text) from magazines and other media, and any other print material that says something about her or him as a person.

To utilise discursive triggers, the life-history collage was used as a dialogical stimulus into how they make sense of "past selves, past events and past circumstances … " (Van Schalkwyk, 2010: 277). This would enable the researcher to narrate their life stories within a discourse highlighting how structure-agency dynamics interact in their social world. A life-history collage, therefore, became a purposive tool to unravel the fluid, local social grammar and temporal contexts (Goodbody and Burns, 2011) which constitute the social environment of the research participants. It values non-dominant ways of generating knowledge and espouses multiple understandings of reality. In addition, there was an urgent need to build rapport and provoke thought in the research participants' activities to ensure an active, communal and participative approach to data generation. A collage research approach, therefore, creates possibilities for exploration, inclusivity and participation in terms of the discursive and analytical pathways that the research could pursue. Inspired by an inherent need for an open-ended research approach that would allow the study to create spaces for participation and conversation, a life-history collage became a tool through which the study could transcend spaces and scripts to produce embedded lived narratives.

Informed by the definition and justifications above, the participants were requested to do a collage describing their aspirations, identity, hopes, failures, and joys, among other self-descriptions. The collage method was based on adapting the Collage Life Elicitation Technique (CLET). CLET is a hybrid qualitative method that facilitates the narrativisation of deep cognitive constructs. It uses in-depth personal interviews to extensively probe a person's subjectivities on specific issues. Van Schalkwyk (2010, p. 676) posits that CLET "scaffolds the process of narrating life experiences…" therefore making it a "valid social action…involving what we think and say (dialogue)…". CLET is a research technique geared towards a deeper comprehension of the symbolism informing meaning-making in narratives. This study did not use all the steps suggested by CLET, but it adapted two phases, specifically collage making and storytelling, which are described below.

Step 1: Collage making

Informed by the CLET method, all ten research participants were given new and old newspapers and magazines together with scissors, some glue for sticking, and two A3 blank sheets of paper. Each participant was requested to return the collages after 10 days.

Zaltman and Coulter (1995) stress that it is necessary to allow participants time to mull over the stimuli they want to produce for the interviews, as this enables the researcher to engage with participants with a heightened cognitive experience. The primary collage task was for the participants to:

> Create a collage defining yourself, your motivations, aspirations, and future goals. Explain the collage in the context of your individuality and how that connects with your hopes for your community.

It was important for the participating youth to actively develop self-authoring skills informed by an authentic reflection of their lives and life situations. The narrative basis of this strategy can serve an auto-epistemological function whereby the sense of self is developed, and connections with others are also known. This research form evokes emotional responses and enables a deep engagement below the level of self-awareness in a participatory manner through the collage-making process.

Step 2: Storytelling

In the storytelling step, it was essential to discover the underlying narratives that describe the research participants. The study engaged in open-ended descriptive dialogues that enabled the research participants to offer in-depth explanations about their collages. Following Seidman (2006), the collages were used during the first in-depth interview in the three series of interviews as described. The first in-depth interview formed the basis for a focused life-history underpinned by the collage as a reference. The researcher gleaned their daily struggles, hopes, aspirations and frustrations using the collage. Initially beginning with a question like 'describe to me what I am seeing here', the participants beamed at the prospect of showing off their handiwork. It was also an opportunity to get an intimate insight into how they position themselves in their self-generated autobiographical artefacts. This life story narrativisation was very important in this study as it enabled the researcher to 'get into' the lifeworld that the participants saw fit for the researcher to see.

Data Analysis

To make sense of the corpus of data that had been collected, the study engaged in a theoretical coding process to generate labels that were conceptually congruent with the theoretical context informing the research. This is adapted from Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open, axial and selective coding approaches and includes other coding approaches to supplement the above to enrich the data analysis and interpretation. Open coding was the most time-consuming and iterative process as it involved searching for similarities and differences in the transcripts to develop conceptual categories. As the codes were created, this process was supplemented with memo-writing, particularly theoretical memo-writing, to enhance the researcher's discussion with self and data. In effect, memo-writing created a dialogical space to question data by posing problems and asking theoretical questions

for concept indicator linkages that allow for theory proposition generation from the data. Memos offered the researcher a reasoned pathway towards theoretical writing and justification, although the inner logic of theoretical writing lay in creating typologies. The study developed numerous typologies to justify the conglomeration of multiple themes and patterns and the connections and disconnections between different stages of the data transcripts. Examples of typologies include youth life worlds, local theories of social transformation, perceptions of place, perceptions of community and a typology of youth agency, among others.

Results of multi-modal participatory processes

Given the messiness of qualitative research and the large corpus of data collected, it was necessary to organise the results chronologically to support analysis. It's important to note that engagement approaches in this study sought to emphasise local theories of social change by initiating local agendas and descriptions of social entrepreneurship to enhance community well-being. While social entrepreneurship intentions were the endgame, the description of the process is important.

Step 1: Conceptualisation of SE in Thibella

The notion of SE was new to the research participants in Thibella, and there was a need to have a local definition and understanding of the concept. The contested meanings of SE were also reflected among the participants, for example Lebo regarded SE as "projects that help the community with social issues that cannot be solved by anyone else." At the same time, Tumelo described it as "activities that uplift the community by assisting people that can't help themselves." Mosia, on the other hand, felt that SE refers to "projects that we can do to create jobs for ourselves and for others." The lack of conceptual clarity at the community level necessitated a need to establish a local conceptualisation of SE and it was agreed that a local context-specific definition of SE must be framed. The youth participants agreed that SE is "activities that serve the needs of poor people that are currently not being provided by any other organisations. This service should be provided at a very low cost to enable as many people as possible to benefit from it."

The definition that emerged from the FGDs with the youth also mirrors the definition of Martin and Osberg (2007). Firstly, the youth sought to identify a social disequilibrium that affects the lives and livelihoods of poor people; secondly, the social disequilibrium is currently not being satisfied by anyone; thirdly, they seek to put a cost to the service they will provide and lastly, it must benefit as many people as possible. This was mentioned by Matshidiso when she mentioned how ".. there are so many people that is poor (sic) in Thibella, our project must help them so that they are not worse." This extends the focus of SE in mainstream literature by introducing a component of compassion. In poor communities like Thibella, compassion seems to be a driving force amongst the youth and

their SE aspirations. The next step discusses the processes of acceptance by the research stakeholders as a critical indicator of legitimacy.

Step 2: Local legitimation

Legitimation occurs at various levels and phases as dictated by the research. In a study that prioritises SE opportunity identification, there was a need for the youth to accept the research processes, tools, outcomes and activities. Prior workshopping of the research tools ensured their acceptance. Local legitimation entails the acceptance of an SE project not only by the research participants but also by the local community, given the social disequilibrium that the project is analysing. During the photovoice sessions, the study catalysed conversations in the community, as numerous community members began to show the research participants where to take pictures as possible opportunities for intervention. Tumelo noted this in the FGD and asked the group if "they had been approached by people so that they come take pictures of social challenges?" Ntsoaki stated that "her camera would have gotten full if she had taken every picture requested." This highlights that there were many possible opportunities in the community, but through a reflective emphasis, the youth had decided to take what would ultimately have a positive community outcome. This legitimation was critical for the further steps to be followed as it highlighted local community acceptance. Getting critical stakeholders on board is vital for coalition building, which is important for SE creation.

Step 3: Recognition of opportunities

The process of opportunity recognition is closely tied to methodological techniques in this study. The research participants had to identify opportunities in their communities using cameras. Lebo wished "the cameras could take more pictures because I had to constantly think before deciding to shoot" and Seipati confirmed this when she stated that "I did not want to take any picture in case something better comes up." Opportunity recognition was done through the photovoice approach when the youth took photographs of social challenges that they regarded as possible opportunities.

Table 1 shows the opportunities for SE intervention identified by the youth. A dialogical exercise was done, in which the SHOWed method was used to initiate conversations on the photographs.

Table 1: Top ten opportunities identified

Photograph no.	Brief description	Issue depicted by picture
14	Children in school uniform drinking alcohol and gambling outside a bottle store	Underage drinking and substance abuse
29	Raw sewage flowing from a burst pipe that is seen as a health hazard	Health hazard
66	A grandmother waiting at a queue at the clinic and looking very tired as the queue is very long	Poor health service delivery
105	A run-down community building that is not being used but has many possibilities if it is refurbished	Site for possible social business
119	A picture of a house where there are four bedridden family members.	Impact of disease on family
133	An open sewage that is a risk to children and animals	Health and safety hazard
188	An unsecured dumpsite that has rubbish strewn all over	Health hazard
201	An artificial waterfall flowing into a dam	Tourism attraction
207	An open green area that can be converted into a park	Communal spaces for interaction and relaxation
226	A closed police post that looks run down	Crime and safety

The next section shows how the top 10 opportunities were further screened using a participatory ranking exercise to have the top two ideas for an SE in Thibella.

Step 4: Evaluation of selected opportunities

Evaluating selected opportunities to a manageable number is a process of engageent informed by the abovementioned participatory logics. A participatory ranking exercise was a valuable conduit to ascertain the preferences of the youth as informed by their context. Informed by the classic participatory work of Rietbergen-McCracken and Narayan-Parker (1998), a pairwise ranking exercise was used to recommend the most accessible opportunity the youth could undertake. The pairwise ranking exercise prioritised the preferences of research participants and assisted them in deciding on the most critical options from among their options. The process entailed the creation of a ranking summary grid that was co-constructed with the youths, showing on the left a descending list of all the opportunities they had identified, and repeated across the top as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Pairwise Ranking

Opportunity Identified	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Score	Rank
Underage drinking		1	3	4	5	1	1	1	1	1	6	4
Raw sewage flowing from a burst pipe	1		3	4	5	2	1	2	2	2	4	5
Long queues at local clinic	3	3		3	5	3	3	3	3	3	7	3
Run-down community building	4	4	4		5	4	4	4	4	4	8	2
House with terminally ill community members	5	5	5	5		5	5	5	5	5	9	1
An open sewage that is a risk to children and animals	1	6	3	4	5		7	6	9	10	2	7
An unsecured dumpsite	1	2	3	4	5	6		7	7	10	2	7
An artificial waterfall flowing into a dam	1	2	3	4	5	6	6		9	10	0	9
An open green area that can be converted into a park	9	2	3	4	5	9	9	9		10	4	5
A closed police post that looks run down	1	2	3	4	5	10	7	8	10		1	8

The grid was completed using a simple step-by-step process that resonated well with research participants. Participants were asked to compare two preferences and justify their choice to convince the group. In each cell where the issues intersected, the preferred option was identified. After the process, a score was determined by counting the times an issue was deemed more valuable. The eighth FGD was held to discuss the outcome of the ranking and whether they felt that it truly reflected their expectations and those of their community. The issue of bedridden terminally ill community members and the run-down community building became the two top priorities. The most illuminating outcome from this process was that the participatory ranking enabled capacity building and identification of local opportunities in a manner that accounts for local development priorities and enables insight into the contextual structuredness of meaning.

Step 5: SE ideation in Thibella

Identifying two potential SE opportunities was a moment of celebration for the research participants. It also provided opportunities to further ideate on the two opportunities to

consolidate the social value and ascertain the social mission outlined in their SE definition. During FGD 7, Thembi revealed how "these two top opportunities need us to think how we can properly plan for them", and this was also affirmed by Baholo when she showed a personal circumstance how she has "… a sick auntie at home and I have to go get her medication from the clinic there is no service for her." There was, therefore, a need to separate issues and ensure that the conceptualisation of each opportunity was informed not only by need but also by sustainability. The university's role was to enable and facilitate the ability of young people to capture, describe and ultimately offer solutions to their own challenges. Although this was a doctoral study, the process followed has implications for establishing methodological innovations in CUPs for community engagement and development. The next section outlines implications for CUPs.

Methodological implications for CUPs

The above results and methodological processes have some implications for CUPs. Community-university partnerships (CUPS) are integral for realising transformative aspirations in university-community relationships. They are "the coming together of diverse interests and people to achieve a common purpose via interactions, information sharing, and coordinated activities" (Jassawalla and Sashittal, 1998, p. 239). Curwood et al. (2011, p. 16) offer a more succinct definition, regarding CUPS "… as collaborations between community organisations and institutions of higher learning to achieve an identified social change goal through community-engaged scholarship…". The notion of collaboration is embedded in the broader logic of engagement, which is a critical enabler of mutual liaisons with the larger public or communities outside the university system. These liaisons are crucial for collaborative partnerships that enhance the connections, common agenda settings and transformation pathways with communities. Based on this engagement ideal, CUPs can be hubs for methodological experimentation that acknowledges and respects local knowledge to create an inclusive knowledge praxis to solve local and global challenges.

Social entrepreneurship thinking and the method suggested in this paper, rooted in participatory processes that prioritise local voices, is a way to strengthen and amplify solutions-seeking methodological processes supported by CUPs. The study affirms that SE with youth can provide accessible and viable employment opportunities. Urban (2008) identified that, "given the sustainable development challenges the country faces, SE can be a critical facet of social life" (Urban, 2008, p. 347). This paper recommends CUPs be embedded in community-informed knowledge generation processes that ultimately solve local challenges or facilitate the community to identify, describe, or potentially solve its challenges and enhance sustainability using local theories of social change.

Despite the messiness of qualitative research, CUPS must facilitate order underpinned by a collaborative emphasis. For this reason, Eisner (2008) stresses that the multiplicity of ways to make and discover knowledge requires researchers to increase the range of ways in which knowledge with youth can be discovered, described and interpreted. This study

uses narratives, photographs and collages to understand the social dynamics of youthhood. The researcher noticed that data collection methods affect the nature, form and quality of the research engagement with young people. Therefore, it was necessary to utilise multiple data collection methods, as it was becoming ".. increasingly clear....that knowledge or understanding is not always reducible to language...". (Eisner, 2008, p. 5). Not only was this multimodal data collection approach beneficial for the variety of data it produced, but, like Pink (2007) notes, it inculcates agency as it develops new ways of understanding people and social science knowledge.

Likewise, this study used multimodal data gathering techniques to complement the narrative basis of this inquiry, go beyond language, and use art-based approaches to help youth elucidate their social realities. Although dialogue and conversation are fundamental to this study, it was necessary to use conversation triggers that enabled the research to explore and inquire about pertinent issues within the youthscape. Weber (2008, p. 45) argues for using image-based data forms because of the "...ability of the image to convey multiple messages, to pose questions, and to point to both abstract and concrete thoughts in so economical a fashion that makes image-based media highly appropriate for communication...". This study used life history collages and photographs to enable young people to define what they deem valuable and expand dialogical possibilities selectively.

This study stresses that young people are competent and responsible beings in their own right, capable of making decisions in the research that would impact their lives. Life history narratives, collages and photovoice approaches used in this study enhanced self-empowerment and conscientised youth about their situation. The use of life histories collages and photovoice techniques created a space for young people to not only bring these nuances to the fore but also craft an alternative youthhood filled with hope and optimism for the future. Art-based data sources are sociologically significant as they carefully negotiate youthhood by "....revealing what is universal by examining in detail what is particular" (Eisner, 2008).

Conclusion

This paper presents a methodological primer for youth engagement on a project on social entrepreneurship. The paper shows how locally contextual research approaches enhance youth engagement by showing the methodological details. It has attempted to expansively explain the methodological process for engaging young people in resource-poor communities like QwaQwa. The paper has embedded this methodological paper in the context of CUPS as critical sites for operationalising engagement between universities and communities on community-led and determined issues. CUPs can be framed to engage with youth on principles of praxis underpinned by respect for local knowledge, collaboration, dialogical engagement and ultimately a shared aspiration for positive and impactful transformation informed by local needs and solutions.

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We Can Lift Each Other Up: Reimagining a Mental Health Intervention as a Critical Service-Learning Initiative

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Abstract

In this paper, I suggest that 'SHAER: Storytelling for Health, Acknowledgment, Expression and Recovery' can be reimagined as a critical service-learning initiative. This suggestion is based on trying to make sense of two unexpected outcomes of implementing a mental-health intervention for women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Makhanda, South Africa. I argue that while SHAER was initially conceived as a mental health intervention, it creates an open space characterised by mutual recognition in which participants appear to others – disclose their identity and reality – and develop a critical consciousness. Drawing on the unexpected centrality of forward-looking, agency-affirming narratives of motherhood, rather than backward-looking, victim or survivor-centred 'trauma stories', I propose that SHAER offers a model for transformative community engagement in higher education institutions in South Africa. In its barest form, SHAER can be seen as a platform for fostering relational agency, self-authorship, and solidarity through narrative exchange and recognition. As such, SHAER aligns with the aims of what Tania Mitchell calls critical service-learning and John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley call democratic civic engagement, and offers a powerful model for embedding community engagement within the academic project.

Keywords: *storytelling, narrative understanding, engaged scholarship, mental-health intervention, critical service-learning, democratic civic engagement*

Introduction

This paper is a response to two calls – first, to the call for higher education in South Africa to be responsive to local socio-economic concerns, and second, for academic research to lead to implementable community engagement in the higher education landscape. It also hopes to further the aim of the *African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement* by "[contributing] to building a body of knowledge on Community Engagement for the

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African continent". The suggestion made here is that 'SHAER: Storytelling for Health, Acknowledgement, Expression, and Recovery' – a mental health intervention for women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence – be reimagined as a critical service-learning initiative. This suggestion is based on two unexpected outcomes of engaged scholarship in which I co-facilitated SHAER in Makhanda, South Africa, with a local NGO and survivors of gender-based violence from the community.

This paper explores the SHAER framework and rationale, as well as findings and recommendations from earlier iterations of SHAER, to frame my interest and involvement in SHAER and the unexpected findings of implementing it in Makhanda. Exploring the potential meaning of these outcomes, and the suggestion I make based on this meaning – that SHAER be reimagined as a service-learning initiative – are the focal points of this paper.

Given these aims, this narrative-style paper may not read like a typical research article reporting on engaged research. However, as a philosopher stepping outside her comfort zone, I attempt to contribute conceptually to the scholarship of engagement, albeit in an unconventional way.

The paper is structured in the following way to pull a thread through the disparate ideas I have drawn on to understand the unexpected outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda, and to arrive at the suggestion that SHAER be reimagined as a critical service-learning initiative:

- Part 1 explores SHAER – its aims, design, and findings and recommendations emanating from earlier iterations of SHAER in Turkey and Afghanistan – to frame my interest in SHAER as a form of engaged scholarship, as well as the implementation of SHAER in Makhanda.

- In Part 2, I turn to SHAER: Makhanda, highlighting two unexpected outcomes and pointing to literature that enables me to explore the significance of these outcomes in our context.

- Finally, in Part 3, I suggest that while SHAER is designed as a mental health intervention, it can be reimagined as a service-learning initiative.

Before I do this, I want to acknowledge that in exploring the unexpected outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda – and particularly the centrality of motherhood in the stories of our participants – I am mindful of my positionality in South Africa as a white, middle-class woman and a Western-trained feminist philosopher, and, given this, of the possibility of distorting the meaning(s) of motherhood – an identity that pervaded the stories told. The reason for this qualifier will, I hope, become clearer as the paper unfolds. Before diving into Part 1, I turn briefly to the theoretical framing of the study and this paper.

Theoretical framing

My interest in SHAER stemmed from work as a feminist philosopher on recovery from the harm of rape. In my PhD and subsequent philosophical exploration this subject (Kelland, 2012, 2016), I was inspired by feminist philosopher Susan Brison (2002), who argues that recovery requires sharing a narrative of one's experience with a supportive audience. Her account of recovery is fundamentally relational, and centres regaining control and a sense of one's voice in the aftermath of rape. To borrow her words:

> [T]he self is both autonomous and socially dependent … narrating memories to others (who are strong and empathic enough to be able to listen) enables survivors to gain more control over the traces left by the trauma. … helping the survivor to remake a self (Brison, 2002, pp. 38–71).

In 'A Narrative Model of Recovery' (2012), I supplemented Brison's relational account with a robust account of the explanatory force of narrative. Drawing on the work of David Velleman (2003, 2006) and Peter Goldie (2003), I suggested that further to regaining control over one's traumatic memories and a sense of one's voice in the presence of others, having a narrative of one's experience enables one to resolve an emotional cadence (Velleman, 2003) and come to understand what one's experience *means* – knowing how one *feels* about and *judges* the experience. Creating a narrative of one's experience promotes greater self-understanding, which is required for the control necessary for agency and personhood in philosophical accounts of the same. In Velleman's (2003, p. 1) words: "a story does more than recount events; it recounts events in a way that renders them intelligible, thus conveying not just information but also understanding." Goldie (2003) also emphasises narrative construction and storytelling in cultivating one's sense of self, providing further support for the idea that having narrative understanding of one's experience allows one to "remake a self" (Brison, 2002, p. 71). For Goldie, engaging with, evaluating, and responding emotionally to events in our past is an essential part of what it means to have a narrative sense of self. Narrative, then, for these thinkers, is embedded in and influences our lives. In Goldie's words:

> We think, talk and write about our lives as narratives, and our doing this can profoundly affect our lives as such, in our engagement with, and response to, our past lives, and in our practical reasoning about what to do in the future. (Goldie, 2003, p. 303)

Moreover, engaging with feminist work on consciousness-raising – including that of Drucilla Cornell (2000), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), bell hooks (2000) Cricket Keating (2005), and Tasha Dubriwny (2005) – led me to believe that changing one's perspective may enable one to acknowledge different meanings, and that engaging in feminist consciousness-raising activities could enable important shifts in perspective. As Dubriwny (2005, p. 401) puts it:

> *The practice of consciousness-raising is one that exemplifies the process of giving individual experiences new meanings by moving them into the realm of social reality… the telling of personal narratives such as those used in consciousness-raising sessions provides a way in which lived experiences are "translated" for both a wider audience and for the teller of the story.*

Furthering my earlier suggestions, in later work (2016), I argued that consciousness-raising could provide women with new language, concepts, and ways of perceiving their experience and allow them to position these experiences within the social structures of patriarchy while also developing the bonds of solidarity among survivors necessary for political mobilisation. These opportunities, I suggested, subvert the need for survivors to draw on canonical narratives that may further the interests of patriarchal forces and lead to experiences of self-blame, guilt, and doubt.

This is the lens that I brought to SHAER: Makhanda and to the writing of this paper.

Part 1: SHAER

'SHAER' is a mental health intervention designed to empower survivors of sexual or gender-based violence in high-prevalence settings where women may not have easy or affordable access to support. The intervention was designed by a network of scholars and activists from the medical sciences and humanities around a series of participatory storytelling sessions that aim to cultivate a 'story circle' in which women can (co-)construct stories, foster an image of self that exceeds their experiences of violence, and challenge societal narratives surrounding gender and violence. The intervention has transformational aims at both individual and collective levels: recovery through the promotion of support, self-reflection, and awareness, and thereby agency – individual empowerment – and the transformation of society through directed action based on a collective identity or solidarity combined with critical consciousness. Recognition plays a central role in transformation at both levels – individually when one is seen and heard, and socially through community-building.

SHAER is divided into six sessions, all designed to last around 3 hours, entitled Trust Building Activities, The History of Storytelling, Life Story Mapping, Story Circles, Spreading a Story, and Celebrate. The first session forms the story circle – exploring expectations, setting up rules of engagement – including trust, confidentiality, and cooperation – and emphasising listening skills. The second examines the role of stories in conveying history, preserving knowledge, and shaping the values of different cultures, as well as the power of storytelling in participants' own lives. Participants explore early experiences of storytelling and the value of reflecting on their stories, especially those concerning formative moments. The third session focuses on life-story mapping and explores milestones and transitions shaping participants' lives and identities; aiming to reveal not only how we understand our lives through stories but also how we are shaped by the stories we live, tell, and hear, and that "[b]ecoming more conscious of our story can help us become, more clearly, the author of our future" (SHAER facilitator's training manual).

Through sharing their memories, participants reflect on how the past has impacted the present, influencing how they feel, relate to others, and interpret experiences. During the activities in this session, participants identify common experiences or themes "to draw out the similarities that connect [them], and the differences that can be better understood and overcome" and are encouraged "to focus on [those] areas that are most likely to bring well-being and freedom" (Training Manual). In the fourth session, participants share personal stories with the circle. They begin by selecting a topic and the message they wish their story to convey. They then explore together how they will tell their stories, thinking about the central character(s), their situation, the plot, any dramatic moments in the story, and the outcome of the story. At each stage, participants share their ideas and provide feedback in dialogue. When they have developed their stories, they share them in what is now a receptive space.

In the fifth session, participants discuss the potential for stories to promote the public good through sharing lessons learned to empower and encourage understanding, and create a collective story to share with their community. The final session celebrates what the participants have learned in their time together, and reviews and assesses the sessions, considering expectations at the outset.

Storytelling is often used in interventions designed to offer support to trauma survivors (Martin et al., 2019; Senehi, 2002; Weatherall, 2020). Most interventions of this kind focus on the sharing of backward-looking stories of the traumatic experience(s) – or 'trauma stories' – and the individual and socially transformative potential of doing so (Jirek, 2017; Martin et al., 2019). Research on previous iterations of SHAER (Mwaba et al., 2021; Mannell et al., 2018; Ahmad et al., 2022) also supports the use of storytelling in recovery and provides evidence of the positive impact of SHAER on survivors. In both cases, storytelling was shown to be empowering for the women involved. Stories allowed them to acknowledge and process their trauma with the validation and recognition of others, to develop positive social identities and enact their agency, "create landscapes of resistance" (Ahmad et al., 2022, p. 530), and challenge social structures. However, in addition, these studies inspire questions about how to conceive of the power and agency of women survivors as culturally specific, situated subjects. Campbell and Mannell (2016), for instance, urge us to explore key but often overlooked markers of women's agency when engaging in interventions of this kind – such as mobilising support from other women – that are grounded in "the ways women themselves [make] sense of their lives" (2016, p. 5). These questions and recommendations were formative of how I made sense of the outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda, and the suggestion I make of reimagining SHAER as a critical service-learning initiative.

When I learned of SHAER from Sharli Paphitis, who was part of this original network, my interest lay in the backward-looking stories upon which most interventions focus. However, again, my interest sprang from a philosophical (and so *purely* conceptual) interest in the role of narrative understanding (particularly when informed by feminist consciousness) in the recovery of rape survivors. I had never engaged in empirical research exploring what I

took to be part of the recovery journey. When she asked me to implement SHAER in South Africa, I was excited about being involved in work that could have a tangible impact on the lives of survivors in my community (as philosophy has a notoriously slow trickle-down effect if not actively taken beyond academia) but also daunted by the prospect of engaging with communities (as philosophy is a notoriously 'blue-skies' discipline). Where I had been *thinking about* narrative in the role of recovery, this project presented the opportunity to put philosophy into practice or see theories emanating from feminist ethics and narrative theory at work.

Part 2: SHAER: Makhanda

South Africa is plagued by sexual and gender-based violence. It is estimated that one in three South African women will experience sexual violence in their lifetime, and that the rate at which women are killed by intimate partners in South Africa is five times the global average (Govender, 2023). Women and gendered and sexual minorities are confronted with a daily *milieu* in which violence is often seen as normal and inevitable (Jewkes et al., 2011; Sibanda-Moyo et al., 2017; Gqola, 2015; Gqola, 2021) In certain circumstances – when it comes to regulating the status quo – S/GBV is even deemed legitimate or prescribed (Kelland, 2024). What is known as 'the scourge' of sexual violence in South Africa exists within a culture in which violence is arguably the norm.

Makhanda is a small city in the Eastern Cape Province, simultaneously characterised as a centre of educational excellence and material poverty. One-third of the city is suburban and hosts elite private schools and Rhodes University. The other two-thirds is constituted by sprawling peri-urban spaces, the material reality of which stands in stark contradistinction from the other third of the city. SHAER was facilitated in Makhanda's peri-urban spaces – known to suburban residents as Grahamstown East – Grahamstown being the previous (colonial) name for our city – and to township residents as eRhini. Characteristic of South Africa, Makhanda is plagued by S/GBV, much of which is perpetrated by partners or those known to women survivors. In the words of the participants in SHAER: Makhanda:

> *"People are dying in the hands of their partners. Children are dying in the hands of men."*

Given that I am a philosopher, the request to implement SHAER in Makhanda brought with it the *practical* and *ethical* necessity of engaged scholarship with local partners who were qualified to hold a space that was constituted by survivors of violence and explicitly directed toward providing them with support in the aftermath of their trauma. These, among other potential risks and significant ethical considerations involved in facilitating SHAER, needed to be carefully considered and planned for. Before applying for ethical clearance implement the intervention in our community, the research team, Sharli Paphitis (Kings College, London) and I, supported by Jenevieve Mannell (University College, London), approached and partnered with the Raphael Centre – a local NGO working to improve the well-being of women, often affected by S/GBV and HIV, in the community, with the expertise and

qualifications required to implement SHAER with us. We partnered with Nomaxabiso Fani and Anne Loeffler. The development of a solid partnership with the Raphael Centre was the first step in preparing for and facilitating SHAER in Makhanda. After forming this partnership and before entering the community, we received ethical approval to do so from Rhodes University's Human Research Ethics Committee – Reference: 2020-1116-3436.

The Raphael Centre's social workers recruited women survivors over the age of 18 from networks in which they were already working. Given the aims of SHAER, they invited women who had experienced S/GBV to participate. Prior to participating in any activities, the women engaged in individual interviews with a social worker who shared their language in which they discussed the project in detail (an information sheet was provided to them in English and isiXhosa – the dominant language spoken in the Eastern Cape). After this information was supplied and the women had a chance to ask questions, they were taken through a consent form detailing, among other things, (1) their right to withdraw from the intervention at any time without a reason or penalty, (2) the sharing of their anonymised data with other researchers if requested, and (3) the use of their personal information and how confidentiality would be maintained. Participants were asked if *they* saw any risks associated with their involvement to identify a locally relevant ethics and risk mitigation strategy. Finally, each woman who consented to participate completed the Hopkins Symptom Checklist-25 screening tool. We did not use these to gather data but to identify any symptoms of extreme trauma among potential participants that could require further risk mitigation strategies, referral to a psychologist or psychiatrist, or even exclusion from the intervention. Given the capacity of the Raphael Centre and the nature of the activities, we worked with 12 women.

Once the recruitment process was complete, we began working through the six sessions described above. Given our partners' interest in asset-based community development (ABCD), we decided in dialogue with them to supplement SHAER with two further workshops, during which they focused on ABCD training.

The two unexpected outcomes that I turn to below and based on which I recommend SHAER as a service-learning offering, emanate from our time during the sessions where participants shared stories, and from the debriefing sessions between myself and the social workers who facilitated SHAER with me. I adopt a feminist and critical lens in exploring them, although I found myself drawing from disparate disciplines and traditions of thought when making sense of them.

Two Unexpected Outcomes: Storytelling, Selfhood, and Motherhood

Somewhat surprisingly – given the reason behind their participation and the goals of the intervention – no 'trauma stories' were constructed in SHAER: Makhanda. Neither did participants identify themselves primarily as survivors of S/GBV in the circles. Instead, they focused on their identities as mothers in the community. These two outcomes – the women's focus on forward-looking stories and their emphasis of agential identities – in their case, the identity of mother – were unexpected. I expected (and braced myself for)

trauma stories that produced a narrative understanding of their experience and what David Velleman (2003, 2006) describes as the resolution of an emotional cadence. I expected to see evidence for or against Brison's claim that a survivor needs to tell a narrative to an empathetic audience to (begin to) recover from the intersubjective harm of rape. I had braced myself for this eventuality from the start, which had informed many of my concerns about the ethical robustness of the intervention. Had I thought I would be exploring motherhood and the responsibilities and values associated with it, I would not have felt the need for as many risk mitigation strategies. But what I saw unfold was, in notable ways, contrary to my expectations.

In exploring why no trauma stories were constructed in SHAER: Makhanda, several explanations may be offered – some innocuously stemming from the activities and others, more interestingly, from the perceived interests of stakeholders in the space, including the facilitators and participants. On the more innocuous front, SHAER does not call for participants to speak about their experiences of S/GBV. Moreover, further to stories of experience and memory, SHAER highlights stories of place and people, journeys, and time, and so opens a range of storytelling themes – both backward-looking and forward-looking – for participants to take up.

On the more interesting front, as Brison (2002) reminds us, the interests of one's audience inform the story one tells. Trauma stories may not have been shared because of facilitators' and/or participants' interests as suggested at the time. Perhaps the fact that we did not frame the activities themselves around S/GBV influenced the stories shared by our participants. Relatedly, perhaps the stories told by others and the interests these stories revealed framed later stories told. These possibilities are plausible and could relate to what I explore below. However, I am intrigued by a possibility relating not to the openness of the activities/space or the interests of the participants or facilitators, but to the participants' foregrounding of *particularly agential identities* in their stories.

Hannah Arendt (1998) speaks of the "disclosure of the 'who' through speech" (pp. 183-186) and "the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and generally appearing before an audience of fellow men" (p. 198). For Arendt, we reveal ourselves as subjects through speech, and our stories:

> [T]ell us more about their subjects … than any product of human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it… who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero… (Arendt, 1998, p. 183).

In disclosing ourselves to one another through speech – and storytelling – we "fall into an already existing web" (Arendt, 1998, p. 183) of relationships in the public or common world – what Arendt calls "human togetherness" – and it is here that action and speech:

> create a space between the participants … It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me (Arendt, 1998, p. 198 [emphasis mine]).

In telling my story to others, I appear to them *as a subject* and establish the reality of myself and my world. As she puts it,

without a space of appearance and without trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one's self, of one's own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt (Arendt, 1998, p. 208).

Arendt's focus on storytelling as the disclosure and establishment of our identities and world(s) is interesting. If we follow Arendt's suggestions, we could think about our participants as disclosing and establishing their identities and realities through the storytelling activities. Our participants talked about motherhood and raising, caring for, and teaching children in almost all the activities we engaged in. When reflecting, creating stories, or exploring milestones, they told stories about themselves as mothers, their mothers or grandmothers, or their responsibilities and values as mothers in the community. Furthermore, the messages they hoped to share through their stories revolved around their role in educating others, fostering respect, and providing ongoing support to one another. The women's identity as victims or survivors of S/GBV was never foregrounded in their conceptions of themselves or one another. One might think this is of little interest in a setting where violence of this kind is often normalised – again, remember that S/GBV and IPV are frequently deemed legitimate in South Africa to regulate heteronormative social norms. However, I suggest that it is not their silence around their identities as victims or survivors, but, rather, their special, almost exclusive focus on their identities as mothers and on the *agential* roles they highlighted in *forward-looking* stories associated with caring for the community that stand out as most pertinent.

As I turn to making sense of the centrality of motherhood in the women's stories in SHAER: Makhanda, I do so with humility and in full recognition that, as a cultural outsider trained in Western philosophy, I cannot *fully* grasp the meaning of the centrality of this identity to the women who participated in SHAER: Makhanda. I am mindful, for instance, that Simone de Beauvoir – a French existential phenomenologist with significant influence on the trajectory of my feminist thought – considered women to be mired in immanence because of their role in reproducing and rearing children, something that does not resonate with the emphasis placed on the agency entailed by this identity in our participants' stories.

What I do wish to do is bring ideas from diverse traditions of thought – including South(ern) African ideas on motherhood – to bear on it, gesturing to their potential significance. As I do, I also bear in mind the warning issued by Mojubuolu Olufunke Okome (2003). In her words:

To avoid overgeneralization and the reification of any given experience, research should focus on the multiplicity of ideas that exist among African women. [...] This is a gargantuan task which cannot be undertaken, as has often been done in the past, by studying one group or a fraction thereof and assuming that what is observed applies to all Africans (Okome, 2003, pp. 90-91).

There are, as Okome puts it, "a multiplicity of ideas" concerning family and motherhood in South(ern) Africa that can be brought to bear upon the centrality of the identity of motherhood in our participants' stories and so, in approaching this centrality, I want to be mindful of this.

Several differences play a role in forming views on motherhood in South Africa. For example, South Africa is constituted of various ethnic groups – including Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Pedi, Tswana, and Ndebele – some are patrilineal (e.g., Xhosa and Zulu cultures) and others matrilineal (e.g., Pedi, Tswana and Ndebele cultures), although most are now, at least contingently, matrifocal. The distinctions here strike me as especially noteworthy in this preamble, given that these are forms of society that emphasise consanguineal over conjugal relations, where the latter is the defining characteristic of typical Western family structures. Again, these distinctions emphasise, I believe, the need to be mindful of one's perspective when interpreting the meaning of motherhood in our participants' stories. (For more on the distinction between conjugal and consanguineal relations, which is relevant to questions of identity, see Nzegwu, 1996). Moreover, although amaXhosa people dominate the Eastern Cape, I do not pretend to know the ethnicity of each of our participants. In addition, these ethnic cultures now exist within a broader hetero-patriarchal culture infused with Western gendered values and norms stemming from earlier forces, including colonialism, Christianity, apartheid, and the anti-apartheid struggle.

Motherhood: A Cherished, Agential Identity

When we consult African and Afrocentric philosophical thought, motherhood appears to hold a salient position in the identities of African women, both in Africa and the diaspora. As "the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women" (Oyewumi, 2000, p. 1096), motherhood, for Oyeronke Oyewumi, among others, is associated with an agential, powerful identity, social position, and role in these traditions. Oyewumi argues that:

> [T]he most important and enduring identity and name that African women claim for themselves is 'mother'. [...] The idea that mothers are powerful is very much a defining characteristic of the institution and its place in society (2000, p. 1097).

In African and Afrocentric thought, mothers are very much a part of and play a significant authorial role in the public sphere and decision-making. In contrast to various Eurocentric versions of motherhood that consign this role and its responsibilities to the realm of 'the private', motherhood in African and Afrocentric thought is strongly associated with public work, roles and responsibilities, and decision-making (Oyewumi, 2000, 2003). The social roles and responsibilities of African motherhood are emphasised in both African feminist philosophy that provides ethnographic accounts of motherhood in traditional (typically West) African communities, as well as in historical, anthropological, and sociological accounts of African motherhood as shaped and practiced in South Africa (Stevenson, 2011).

In these accounts, African mothers are very much part of 'the public' sphere – their role as mothers stretches beyond what Western feminists might consider the private or domestic household to include public decision-making and responsibilities.

Culturally, African mothers exist and function in the public insofar as mothering is seen as collective; as the popular African adage goes: It takes a village to raise a child. Oyewumi (2003) speaks of "multiple" and "non-exclusive mothering" to refer to the collective experience of mothering in many African cultures and communities where mothering is not simply about "childbearing and the mothering of children" but also about "the nurturing of the community" (2003, p. 5). Indeed, what she calls co-mothering, which is not reducible to, but transcends, biological motherhood, founds, for Oyewumi, sisterly relations among African women that are "the essence of community building" (2003, p. 13) and the basis of much political action in Africa.

This picture of motherhood as a collective experience and activity is also reflected in the work of African feminists living and working outside of Africa, who speak about African cultural values pertaining to collective childcare. Abimbola S. Shoboiki (2019), for instance, drawing on both the work of African and African-American feminists – such as Patricia Hill Collins – references mothering collectives and 'othermothers' in her work on her identity formation as an African woman and explicitly links 'other-mothering' and co-mothering networks to social activism. In her words,

> *motherhood can provide African women with a base of self-actualisation, status in the African community, and a reason for social activism. [...] Motherhood provides a basis for community othermothers to participate in social activism (Shoboiki, 2019, p. 29 [emphasis added]).*

The meaning of the concept 'othermother' is familiar in my context, and yet before I began trying to understand the unexpected outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda, and particularly the special focus that the women in SHAER: Makhanda placed on the identity of motherhood in their stories, I had never encountered a term for it. Indeed, in speaking of the term to one of my Black South African students, he remarked, "Then most of us are raised by 'othermothers'". This term can be found in the work of West African feminists and in African (and other marginalised) women who have moved to unfamiliar places or found themselves navigating foreign countries or cultures (Shoboiki, 2019).

This stronger connection between motherhood and social activism also finds expression in South Africa, where historical accounts exist of self-identifying "mother-activists". For instance, Judith Stevenson (2011), working with Black South African women who were active in the anti-apartheid struggle to document and archive their experiences as mother-activists, reports that in the eyes of these women:

> *As in many parts of South Africa, women's activism during this period was, in large part, seen by themselves as entwined with their identities as mothers (Stevenson, 2011, p. 132).*

Indeed, in great measure, these women's stories define the 'good mother' at the time as:

[O]ne who was willing to sacrifice herself through political activism to the point of torture, imprisonment, or perhaps even death (Stevenson, 2011, pp. 150–151).

Of course, ideas associated with the 'good mother' at the time, as both Stevenson (2011) and her mother-activists acknowledge, shift based on race, class, and other socially salient identity markers, but for a number of South African mothers at the time, the 'good mother' was an inherently political and socially powerful identity associated with active work outside of the so-called private sphere, driven by the aims of justice and community upliftment (Stevenson, 2011). Here, again, we see the public responsibilities associated with this especially powerful, agential identity in many African cultures.

Far from Beauvoir's (1949) picture of motherhood in *The Second Sex* – in which women are mired in immanence (passivity, or the more object-like [as opposed to subject-like] aspects of the human condition) because of the meaning attached to our reproductive potential – motherhood, here, is aligned with agency and activity in society. Moreover, it is associated with a duty of care for others *and* the community (Oyewumi, 2000, 2003). Given this, while the SHAER: Makhanda women's disinclination to highlight their identities as victims or survivors of S/GBV could be chalked up to simpler reasons – including the open nature of the activities, the perceived interests of the people in the room, or the normative, even legitimised, nature of violence in South Africa – I think there could be something more positive to say. I believe it is possible that we read this silence not as a failure to acknowledge or even as resistance to the identity of victim or survivor of S/GBV, but rather as a refusal grounded in these women's 'cherished' and socially salient identity as African mothers, with all the power and agency this identity entails. As mothers, the participants in SHAER: Makhanda focused on forward-looking stories in which their agency as subjects with roles and responsibilities in shaping the community's future was of primary significance. Two central takeaways that the women were left with were, first, the power of stories and storytelling to teach us how to act and what to value, and, second, their ability as a (mothering) collective to embody and foster particular values in their community through storytelling. For the women, while stories can remind us of people, places, our roots or past, and enable us to reflect on (perhaps traumatic) memories, they do so to help us identify or disclose who we are, what we value, our aspirational norms for future action, and to transfer this knowledge to others.

Returning to Campbell and Mannell's (2016) call for researchers to explore central but perhaps overlooked markers of women's agency that are grounded in "the ways women themselves [make] sense of their lives" (2016, p. 5), the women in SHAER: Makhanda point to a particularly salient marker of agency for women in South(ern) Africa – their status as mothers, othermothers, and mothering collectives – and wanted to deliver the following message: "We want to empower women … We can lift each other up." The identities they highlighted exceed the violence they endured, and challenge dominant social schemes and

scripts of both victims and survivors of S/GBV and of victimisation and its effects. They also challenge my – and perhaps others' – expectations of what the journey of recovery can look like, as well as what an intervention for survivors of S/GBV in South(ern) Africa might entail. Perhaps the unexpected outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda point us in the direction, to borrow the terms of Ahmad et al. (2022) once again, of further 'landscapes of resistance'.

Part 3: Reimagining SHAER as a Service-Learning Initiative

Work towards institutionalising community engagement in South African HEIs is explicitly encouraged and considered integral to academic and student life. To borrow Gerda Bender's words:

> *Since the publication of White Paper 3 (Department of Education, 1997), perceptions of community service have changed from a view of community service as one of the three silos of higher education – along with learning/teaching and research – to a view of community service as an integral and necessary part of learning/teaching and research, infusing and enriching the latter two higher education functions with a sense of context, relevance and application (Bender, 2008, p. 83).*

While there has been, and continues to be, debate over how we should understand this imperative (Saidi and Boti, 2023) or, indeed, the nature of community engagement, the scholarship of engagement, or civic engagement (Saltmarsh and Hartley, 2011) it is now relatively uncontroversial to believe that HEIs have *a duty* to be responsive to social ills and needs, and to transform not only the students under our care but also the communities within which we are embedded. Over the past three decades, then, we have witnessed the emergence and institutionalisation of community engagement in the academy in the forms of engaged research, such as participatory action research, service-learning, and other student volunteer and work-placement programmes. The call to embed community engagement into our research and teaching and learning practices is resounding at Rhodes University, where our vision and mission include creating locally responsive knowledge, and a number of colleagues have taken up this call for the betterment of our students, research, and community. Indeed, the university is committed, as our Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sizwe Mabizela, put it in his inaugural address, to be not only *in* Makhanda but *for* Makhanda (Mabizela, 2015).

In this final part of the paper, in light of the unexpected outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda, I suggest that SHAER can be reimagined from a mental health intervention into a transformative, critical service-learning course (Mitchell, 2008) focused on 'empowerment for participatory democracy.' Perhaps the most important consideration to be reminded of before we move on is that this model does not have to be treated as an intervention for recovery from the trauma resulting from S/GBV – it neither calls for 'trauma stories' to be told nor does it necessitate working with traumatised individuals. In its barest form, SHAER can be seen as a model for critical conscientisation – storytelling for health, expression, and

acknowledgement – a space where, following Arendt (1998), we appear to others as others appear to us.

Service learning is a pedagogical approach that embeds community engagement into the curriculum of a course in a way that is, again, integral to the curriculum (Bender, 2008) – integral, that is, to what is learnt in the course – and not just a 'nice-to-have add-on' (Saltmarsh and Hartley, 2011). As has often been said, what students learn in the course informs the service they engage in, and the service they engage in informs what they learn; informs, that is, the learning outcomes of the course. One could argue that service-learning, as an experiential pedagogical approach, responds to John Dewey's (1916) concerns with the dualism or distinction reproduced in education between thought and action, which is arguably reinforced by traditional approaches to teaching and learning. In service learning, the gap between what my colleague, Pedro Tabensky, calls the 'life of the mind' and 'the life of action' is explicitly challenged.

In suggesting that SHAER be reimagined as a *critical* service-learning course, I am guided by Tania Mitchell (2008), who argues that critical service-learning (as opposed to traditional service-learning) is characterised by an *explicit social change orientation*, which she also describes as 'social justice education.' By this, she means that critical service-learning aims to address and contribute to dismantling structures of inequality in communities. In order to accomplish this, those who adopt critical service-learning as a pedagogical approach highlight the redistribution of power in university-community engagements and the development of authentic relationships between university actors – faculty and students – and the community. Developing these relationships and redistributing power, according to Mitchell, requires acknowledging and understanding the various similarities *and* differences among the participants in the engagement as possibilities for connection. Critical service-learning, that is, recognises and works with difference in dialogic engagement or verbal exchange – also described as 'being together', reminiscent of Arendt's 'appearance' in 'human togetherness' – whereby all participants are enabled to develop the awareness necessary for both authenticity and the development of authentic relationships. It is worth quoting Mitchell at some length:

> *A critical service-learning pedagogy asks students to use what is happening in the classroom – the readings, discussion, writing assignments and other activities – to reflect on their service in the context of larger social issues. "Such a vision is compatible with liberatory forms of pedagogy in which a goal of education is to challenge students to become knowledgeable of the social, political, and economic forces that have shaped their lives and the lives of others" (Rhoads, 1998, p. 41) … A critical service-learning pedagogy moves beyond simply doing service in connection to a course's academic content to challenging students to articulate their own visions for a more just society and investigate and contemplate actions that propel society toward those visions. … A critical service-learning pedagogy asks everyone to approach the service-learning relationship with authenticity. In this process, we would develop a shared agenda, acknowledge the power relations implicit in our interactions, and recognize the complexity of identity… (Mitchell, 2008, pp. 55–59).*

These aims are also nicely captured in the phrase 'service for critical consciousness'. Proponents of this approach hope that students come to pay attention to and challenge the root causes of social concerns and, in so doing, develop an 'ethics of care' and become 'agents for change' or active, engaged citizens.

Critical service-learning, as described by Mitchell (2008), aligns well with what John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley (2011) call 'democratic civic engagement', which is framed by an explicit focus on *purpose* – furthering and instilling the values of democracy or what I have called empowerment for participatory democracy – and *process*. Akin to the dialogic exchange described by Mitchell (2008), Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) highlight *reciprocity* among participants of democratic civic engagement – i.e., academics, students, and members of the community. Community engagement that is explicitly democratic focuses, they argue, on preparing students for lives of civic engagement – or education for citizenship – while working *with* (rather than *for*) the community in an inclusive, collaborative, and problem-oriented knowledge co-creation process. As they put it:

> Democratic engagement seeks the public good with the public, and not merely for the public, as a means of facilitating a more active and engaged democracy. … Knowledge generation and discovery is a process of cocreation, breaking down the distinctions between knowledge producers and knowledge consumers. … Democratic engagement locates the university within an ecosystem of knowledge production, requiring interaction with other knowledge producers outside the university for the creation of new problem-solving knowledge through a multidirectional flow of knowledge and expertise. In this paradigm, students learn cooperative and creative problem solving within learning environments in which faculty, students, and individuals from the community work and deliberate together (Saltmarsh and Hartley, 2011, pp. 20–21).

This is precisely the kind of service-learning initiative that I believe SHAER has the potential to be reimagined into. As a co-constructed and co-owned space, SHAER redistributes power among participants in the story circle – faculty, students, and members of the community – as everyone deliberates and makes meaning together. Moreover, as shown in all iterations of SHAER, the model fosters self and other awareness – awareness of the forces that have shaped our lives and the lives of others – and the kind of solidarity underpinning the relationships that Mitchell (2008) and Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) describe. Moreover, in both iterations of SHAER in Makhanda, we saw the women 'articulating visions for a more just society' and thinking about how to work together to create the future they envisioned. At the culmination of the intervention, in Session 5, Spreading a Story, our participants wanted to deliver the following messages to their community through their collective stories and storytelling activities:

> Respect starts at home.
>
> Learning starts at home.
>
> Respect is earned with both young and old.

Education is a foundation whereby children and adults learn respect.

<div align="right">

SHAER: Makhanda (1)

</div>

We want to empower women to be able to speak out without being scared.

We want to provide a space where people know that their secrets are safe.

We want to give support to those in need to show them that we stand by them.

We can lift each other up.

<div align="right">

SHAER: Makhanda (2)

</div>

The tone of these messages differs strikingly from that expressed in the participant's quote included earlier: "People are dying in the hands of their partners. Children are dying in the hands of men." These messages are, by contrast, hopeful and, as with any real hope, speak to the role of directed action on the part of the women as agents in realising their hopes for a better future for themselves, their children, and their community.

Indeed, in reading the work of the likes of Mitchell (2008) and Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) on critical service-learning and democratic civic engagement, respectively, I am struck by the ways in which SHAER brings to life the aims of these approaches to democratically framed, community-engaged teaching and learning.

SHAER encourages precisely the kind of 'world'-travelling, to borrow a phrase from Maria Lugones (1987), that underpins the dialogical engagement envisioned by critical service learning scholars and the reciprocity envisioned by practitioners of democratic civic engagement. As seen through previous iterations of SHAER – both the two in Makhanda referenced in this paper and those that took place in Turkey and Afghanistan – SHAER fosters a dialogical space in which those participating in the story circle are able to express their agency, disclose their identity and experiences, and build bonds of solidarity. Further to being the kinds of spaces in which those who have experienced interpersonal violence are able to recover with the help of others (Brison, 2002, Mannell et al., 2018; Ahmad et al., 2022), these are also the kinds of spaces in which communities of inquiry flourish, epistemic agency is fostered and supported, and moral learning takes place (Kelland et al., 2024).

I imagine that SHAER could be reimagined into a number of different service-learning courses. Perhaps most obviously, given its current form and particular aims, in courses in Psychology, Public Health, or Social Work. However, given the aims of democratic community engagement, coupled with the unexpected outcomes of SHAER: Makhanda, I think it could also and, perhaps even more fruitfully, be reimagined into a post-graduate course in applied ethics or women's and gender studies. Any course reimagining SHAER as a service-learning initiative would enable students to develop a reflexive understanding of themselves, others, and their positionality in relation to others, as well as an advanced understanding of community and their role in actively shaping it.

As a service-learning initiative, SHAER has the potential to foster personal transformation for students and community members through deeper ethical and self-awareness, and to advance social justice through feminist, narrative-based, participatory practice "encouraging students to understand and question the social and political factors that cause social problems and to challenge and change them" (Hartley and Saltmarsh, 2011, p. 290). In this initiative, all participants – faculty, students, community partners, and members of the community – would be engaged in a collective storytelling and reflective process that contributes to a decolonial pedagogy of care, recognition, and solidarity. As a service-learning initiative, SHAER could also invite institutions to rethink their metrics of success in engagement: from impact in terms of research outputs to relationships of solidarity and community-university mobilisation.

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Advancing Integrity and Social Justice through Faith-based Service Learning in Kiambiu, Kenya

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Abstract

The Franciscan School of the Institute of Spirituality and Religious Formation, Tangaza University, offers a course on peace, justice, and human rights during which students engage with the Kiambiu small Christian communities through five weeks of community engagement service learning from a faith based perspective to implement the theory they learn. The programme includes prayers, Bible study, and reflection on the factors affecting their lives and society. Both formative and summative assessments form the total grade for the course. A study was undertaken with the following objectives: to explore how students of the Franciscan school engage with members of the Kiambiu small Christian communities; to examine issues that affect the socio-economic lives of the Kiambiu small Christian communities; to evaluate socio-political issues that challenge the integrity of the Kiambiu small Christian communities, and to involve the Kiambiu small Christian communities in their rights for a just nation. The methodology for this study is the five-stage pastoral cycle, and the experiential educational theory was used as its framework. The programme targeted 17 small Christian communities with a population of 425. There were 28 students in total. The outcome of the community engagement reveals that both communities and students are enriched and transformed by the experience. The findings highlight that, through community engagement, the Kiambiu small Christian communities' members work and transform their attitude towards justice, peace, and human rights, improve their economic status, and alleviate their standard of living by starting self-reliance income-generating projects, while the students are transformed intellectually and affectively.

Keywords: *service learning, peace, justice, human rights, community engagement, and experiential educational theory*

Introduction

This paper focuses on community engagement service learning from the perspective of a faith-based education institution and its pastoral cycle methodology. The Franciscan School at the Institute of Spirituality and Religious Formation, Tangaza University, teaches peace, justice, and human rights courses. Tangaza University, established in 1986, is in Lang'ata, Nairobi, Kenya. The university is run by the Catholic Church and is known for its focus on theology, philosophy, education, and social sciences. The course on peace, justice, and human rights takes place each academic year from January to May and falls during the Lenten season within the Church liturgical calendar. Each Lenten season, the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops General Secretariat, Department of Catholic Justice and Peace prepares a Lenten theme for the Catholic followers to use during the Lent season (KCCB-Justice and Peace Department, 2024). The lecturer at the Franciscan School teaches the aforementioned course on peace, justice, and human rights issues as a practical approach to community service learning.

The Franciscan School identified the Kiambiu community under the Buruburu parish as a collaborator for community engagement service learning. Service learning is a reflective pedagogy that combines curriculum content and practice. Rooted in credit-bearing formal courses, service learning comprises community service, curriculum connection, and reflection (Resch & Schrittesser, 2023). It focuses on the holistic development of society, based on educating students and equipping them with skills to address local community needs. Service learning aims to enable students to explore the connection between the theoretical realm of the classroom and practical community issues (Resch & Schrittesser, 2023).

The Kiambiu community is situated between Eastleigh and Nairobi River in the eastern part of Nairobi, Kenya. It borders Buruburu, Moi Airbase and Uhuru estate. It has an estimated population of 40,000 to 50,000 inhabitants (Otieno, 2018). The Buruburu parish has established 17 small Christian communities (SCC) whose members vary from 14 to 30, within the Kiambiu community. Each Sunday, the members of SCCs meet in different houses and these Kiambiu SCCs are the service learning units of the students at the Franciscan School.

Life in the Kiambiu slum presents numerous challenges and complexities for residents. The Kiambiu community reflects the broader issues of urban poverty, lack of peace, justice, inequality, and marginalisation. The Kiambiu slum is often characterised by overcrowding, with multiple families sharing small living spaces in makeshift constructed housing with illegal electricity connections (Otieno, 2018). They lack access to basic amenities such as clean water and sanitation facilities (Wangari, 2018; Otieno, 2018). Slum residents typically face high levels of poverty and limited economic opportunities. Many members engage in informal sector activities such as street vending, waste picking, or domestic work, which often offer unstable incomes. Education opportunities in slum areas are often limited, with inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and poorly trained teachers.

Many children are unable to attend school due to financial constraints, leading to low literacy rates and perpetuating cycles of poverty. Slum residents are disproportionately affected by health challenges, limited access to healthcare services, and environmental hazards (Ayejugbagbe, 2023). Limited police presence and ineffective law enforcement contribute to a sense of insecurity among residents, who contend with issues such as gang activity, drug trafficking, and gender-based violence (Bird, Montebruno & Regan, 2017). The community is denied access to essential services and marginalised in decision-making processes (Ayejugbagbe, 2023). At the same time, there might be many strengths within this community that are perhaps less immediately visible than these socioeconomic and political issues.

The Kiambiu community has notable strengths that support its social cohesiveness and resilience despite these difficulties. The existence of 17 SCCs demonstrates robust social networks that promote cooperation, religious unity, and group problem-solving. By operating small enterprises, many locals exhibit an entrepreneurial spirit and show ingenuity and flexibility in overcoming financial difficulties. Community-driven projects such as self-help groups and grassroots organisations are essential in tackling security issues, promoting better services, and expanding access to education. Community links are further reinforced by cultural and religious identities, which offer emotional support and a sense of belonging. These assets are crucial in determining the community's resilience and capacity for constructive change, even though they are occasionally less apparent than the socioeconomic and political problems.

The paper begins with an explanation of the pastoral cycle methodology and the experiential educational theory underpinning the service learning course. This is followed by service learning and community engagement, practical steps of the pastoral cycle, theological reflection, action plan, summary, and recommendations. However, the positionality of the researchers is expressed at the outset.

Positionality

The researchers admit that their positionality as Franciscan School members may introduce a bias toward faith-based initiatives in community participation. Their Franciscan identity, which emphasises justice, compassion, and the dignity of all individuals, influences their viewpoints, beliefs, and methods. This positionality affects how they interact with communities, prioritise solutions, and understand social challenges. This faith-based framework offers a comprehensive and moral perspective for dealing with societal issues, but it also calls for a critical understanding of its drawbacks and possible prejudices. To guarantee a fair and inclusive approach, the researchers are still dedicated to introspection and being receptive to different points of view.

Spiritual and religious perspectives are profoundly ingrained in the structure of this study and are not merely incidental. As a guiding approach, the pastoral cycle places a strong emphasis on action, theological investigation, and contemplation within a framework of

faith. This strategy guarantees that research findings contribute to significant and long-lasting community transformation by promoting a transformative approach where faith and social justice interact. The researchers aim to participate in a dialogical process that respects both religious and secular viewpoints, because they acknowledge that their religious tradition may influence how they understand societal concerns and ethical answers. Moreover, the researchers take a critical and reflective approach to their work because they acknowledge the possibility of faith-based prejudice.
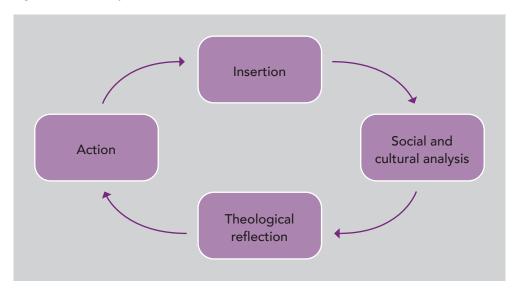
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The pastoral cycle was used as a theoretical framework and methodological tool that combines faith-based viewpoints with experiential learning theory and service learning concepts. By connecting theological reflection with social action, the pastoral cycle expands the analysis to community transformation, whereas experiential learning and service learning are primarily concerned with student outcomes.

Pastoral Cycle Methodology

The pastoral cycle is the methodology that the Franciscan School used for community service learning, which connects students' theory and concerns, leading to action (Holland & Henriot, 1983). The pastoral cycle has four elements: insertion, social and cultural analysis, faith reflection, and action process.

Figure 1: Pastoral Cycle

The pastoral cycle grew out of a methodology for social transformation of 'see, judge and act' introduced by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn. In the early 1900s, Cardinal Joseph Cardijn (1882-1967) was involved in pastoral process and founded the Young Christian Workers movement, out of which grew the Young Christian Students (YCS), whose methodology was based on 'see, judge and act' (Gremillion, 1992). The pastoral cycle typically referred to a methodological approach used in participatory development and community empowerment initiatives, especially in rural or pastoralist contexts. This approach involves a cyclical process of community engagement, analysis, planning, action, and reflection, aimed at addressing local challenges and improving livelihoods sustainably.

The pastoral cycle methodology begins with insertion, where students enter into the community, and engage with the community's issues. Holland and Henriot (1983) uphold that insertion deals with students' entering into the community, impacted by the community issues and experience, and observe how those issues affect the life of that community (Freire, 1970; Holland & Henriot, 1983; Resch & Schrittesser, 2023). The second step concerns social and cultural analysis in which the facilitators must understand the issue well enough to believe that, by their engagement, they will make a difference. The students and the community jointly participate in social, economic, cultural, political, environmental, and historical analysis of the situation (Sen, 2003). In the third step, which is theological reflection, the community and the students do a pastoral analysis in which they ask theological questions (Goody, 2020). Theological reflection engages the perspectives of faith and prayer by prayerfully exploring what faith says about the issue, and what the community's response is to that issue; what the scriptures say on the issue; and the Christian church's understanding of God's justice and how these elements of faith respond to the life of the community. The theological reflection gives new insights and offers new responses towards addressing the root causes of issues that must lead to action (Holland & Henriot, 1983).

The final stage is action, which is direct community engagement. The action involves planning what to do and accomplish on the issue, what to change and how to change it. The community and students work together to eradicate the cause of the problem. They look for resources: action requires assigning tasks and responsibilities, strategies, implementation, observation of the calendar, monitoring and evaluating the progress and celebrating the steps achieved (Cavanagh & Byron, 1992; Holland & Henriot, 1983). Pope Paul VI in his *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971, No. 4) insisted that the action of the community must solve the problem affecting them by analysing with objectivity the situation, based on the gospel values. Each of the four steps of the pastoral cycle builds on the other, extending the previous insight and experience.

The pastoral cycle, which underpins service learning courses at the Franciscan School, is a useful framework for service learning, especially when it comes to encouraging critical engagement and reflective practice. This interactive method improves students' comprehension of social justice whilst simultaneously strengthening their ability to jointly

effect significant change in their communities. The pastoral cycle greatly enhances students' capacity to link theoretical knowledge with real-world application when it is incorporated into service learning programmes. This results in more meaningful community service outcomes (Groome, 2020).

The pastoral cycle provides an organised method for comprehending and tackling complicated social challenges from a faith based perspective. Students are guided to interact more intimately with the communities they serve by adhering to the four stages of the cycle: experience, sociological analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral planning. This creates a reflective and action-oriented learning environment. The method promotes student engagement, which is both knowledgeable and caring, by encouraging students to combine theory with practice in addition to assisting them in critically evaluating the underlying causes of social problems (Holland & Henriot, 1983). The emphasis is on caring and the cultivation of humanity in students (Nussbaum, 1997).

Experiential Educational Theory

The pastoral cycle resonates with and can be underpinned by experiential educational theory. Experiential educational theory, also known as experiential learning theory, is a framework that focuses on how individuals learn through their experiences. This theory emphasises the importance of direct experience and reflection in the learning process. Kolb (1984) introduced experience as the main source of learning. He contended that experiential learning is a combination of experience, perception, cognition and behaviour. It is a holistic and integrative perspective in the cycle of learning. There is a strong connection between experiential education and service learning since both emphasise learning by firsthand experience. Through the integration of education, reflection, and meaningful community involvement, service learning fosters civic and personal responsibility, while improving learning outcomes. John Dewey's (1916) experiential education philosophy contends that knowledge is created by actively engaging in real-world situations (Hassen, 2023). According to experiential theory, which supports service learning, students learn best when they apply academic concepts in real-world situations. This reinforces the idea that education should focus on developing a sense of responsibility and community engagement in addition to knowledge acquisition (Kolb, 2015; Jacoby et al., 2021).

According to Kolb's model, learning is a cyclical process that involves four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989), which is in alignment with the pastoral cycle methodology. Experiential education theory has similar principles to the pastoral cycle and service learning for community engagement. At the learning experience stage, learners (students) encounter a new experience which involves actively engaging with the experience through observation and participation. After the experience, learners reflect on what happened and try to understand it from different perspectives. This process includes feedback on the effectiveness of the learners' learning efforts (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). The

authors observe that in learning there is a process of moving forward and backward by reflection, action, feeling, and thinking (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). They mention learning styles and learning spaces that enhance experiential learning in higher education (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Here the learners try to make sense of their experiences by forming theories or concepts. As they occupy the space, they analyse the experience and try to understand the underlying principles or patterns. Finally, learners apply their new understanding to real-life situations.

These situations are embedded in a community of practice through legitimate peripheral participation. This learning experience space goes beyond the teacher and the classroom and involves the community of practice (Kolb & Kolb 2005). Experiential educational learning theory suggests that effective learning occurs when all four stages are engaged in a continuous cycle, with each stage reinforcing and informing the others.

Community Engagement Service Learning

Following the ethical guidelines of service learning, this course on peace, justice and human rights protects and upholds the dignity of all participants. On the one hand, the ethics review board at Tangaza University granted ethical approval to the teachers in charge of this course. The course's goals, methods, and possible effects on the community were carefully evaluated as part of this approval procedure. Participants' informed consent, maintaining the privacy of sensitive data, and minimising any possible harm, were all ethical factors to consider. On the other hand, educators prepare students for service learning praxis in community engagement. Students are first taught the fundamental ideas of civic engagement and service learning, such as the value of reciprocity and the background of the communities with which they will interact. Then, via addressing power dynamics, developing empathy and ethical awareness, and highlighting the value of civic engagement, the educators instruct students to develop a civic mindset. Through explicitly defined learning objectives, skill-building courses connect theoretical knowledge to practical application by focusing on communication, teamwork, leadership, and project management. Pre-service contemplation exercises assist students in setting personal objectives prior to engagement, while community introductions acquaint them with needs in the area. The educators coach and support the students, promoting adaptation based on input from the community. Students engage in reflection exercises following their service to examine their experiences and relate them to theoretical frameworks in the classroom.

Design and Methodology of the Study

The pastoral cycle methodology's application in community engagement service learning is examined in this study, using a case study method. Both qualitative reflective techniques and a quantitative survey were used to gather data. Members of 14 of the 17 Kiambiu SCCs were specifically given a structured questionnaire with a four-point Likert scale to gauge

their opinions on issues like sovereignty, access to clean water, and the high cost of living. Utilising descriptive statistical analysis, the survey data was interpreted. The Franciscan service learning students and community members participated in group discussions and kept reflective journals, which yielded qualitative data. The study complied with ethical standards, guaranteeing voluntary participation, confidentiality in data handling, and informed consent from all participants.

Practical Steps of the Pastoral Cycle

Step 1: Insertion

At the insertion step, the Franciscan School service learning class moved to the Kiambiu Community for five weeks for engagement with Kiambiu SCC members. This was a class of 28 students: 12 male and 16 female students. Their ages ranged between 20 and 30 years old, while the members of the Kiambiu community have male and female members: youth, parents, and middle-aged members ranging up to about 55 to 60 years of age.

The students and the Kiambiu community began with a joint study of the book *Integrity for a Just Nation Lenten Campaign 2024* (KCCB_CPIHD_Catholic Justice and Peace Department, 2024). The book has seven themes: sovereignty of the people, right to clean, safe, and adequate water, challenges of the high cost of living, religious extremism, emerging threats to family, prayer for the canonisation of Cardinal Otunga, and prayer for the anti-corruption campaign. After the joint study of the book, the community concluded that the themes of sovereignty of the people, the right to clean, safe, and adequate water, and challenges of high cost of living affect them directly. Based on their conclusion, the students surveyed these three themes (KCCB-CPIHD-Catholic Justice and Peace Department, 2024).

Step 2: Social Analysis

In step two, the Franciscan School service learning students engaged Kiambiu SCCs on social analysis. Each community reflected on their social experiences based on questions posed in the book *Integrity for a Just Nation Lenten Campaign 2024*. The questions were divided into three parts: (1) sovereignty of the people, (2) the right to clean, safe, and adequate water, and (3) challenges of high cost of living. Fourteen (14) small Christian communities out of 17 participated in the social analysis process. The data was analysed according to a rating scale with the following key: 1-agree; 2-strongly agree; 3-disagree; 4-strongly disagree.

- *Sovereignty of the people*

Experience, social analysis, theological thought, and pastoral action are all essential elements of the pastoral cycle, and the results show how the people engage with their national identity, civic duties, and relationships with the state and the Church. In the Kiambiu community, the idea of sovereignty can be interpreted via the prisms of faithfulness, activism, and support for the underprivileged. The research emphasises the community of Kiambiu's lived reality, where people exhibit a strong feeling of patriotism. As Kenyans,

none of the respondents disagreed that loyalty is a fundamental aspect of who they are. On the other hand, the community's experience with government initiatives to safeguard vulnerable and impoverished groups is characterised by a mixed perspective. Significantly more members disagree, indicating a deeper sense of disenchantment and mistrust with political systems, than the minority who think the government protects their rights. The disparity between the community's collective experience and perspective on sovereignty is shaped by the reality of disappointment with government accountability, and the ideal of national allegiance. *They cannot entirely trust the government to defend the sovereignty of the people since, in their experience, it does not always look out for the wellbeing of all citizens.*

The differences in opinion on government responsibility point to structural problems with Kenya's democratic system. Although the Kiambiu community acknowledges its sovereignty inside the borders of the country, this sovereignty is jeopardised by public officials' dishonesty and lack of openness. Deep-seated political dissatisfaction was indicated by 57% of Kiambiu SCC members, who strongly disagreed that voters could expect accountability from elected officials. People who dislike a system are less likely to interact with it because they believe it to be corrupt or inefficient. This has an impact on civic engagement. Furthermore, compared to the government, the Church, which is a significant institution in the community, is thought to be a better defender of the underprivileged. The majority of SCC members recognise the Church's role in advancing the welfare of the vulnerable, including through the Buruburu Catholic Church's initiatives, and see the Church's support for social justice and human dignity as good. This implies a move away from depending on official institutions and toward religious organisations as reliable guardians of human rights and dignity.

The Church's defence of the rights of underrepresented groups is consistent with the teachings of Pope John Paul II (1995), who highlighted the moral duty to assist those who are in need. The Kiambiu community's conception of sovereignty is shaped by this theological framework, which views it as an obligation to fight for justice and protect the dignity of all citizens, especially the weaker ones. The Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2017) is one example of how the Church is involved in civic affairs, demonstrating the Church's theological commitment to empowering citizens to be active citizens. By consistently advocating for social justice, this civic participation ensures that the sovereignty of the people is honoured and maintained, which is crucial for the community's well-being.

The pastoral cycle urges action that closes the gap between the community's experience and its goals for a just society in light of these discoveries. The allegiance of the Kiambiu people to their country, their civic engagement, and their reliance on the Church for advocacy, are all closely linked to their sovereignty. But the lack of faith in government transparency emphasises the necessity of more extensive pastoral involvement to deal with these structural problems.

- *Right to clean, safe, and adequate water in Kiambiu community*

The results show that the Kiambiu community's access to sufficient, safe, and clean water is seriously disadvantaged. With 29% strongly disagreeing and 50% disagreeing, there was not a single SCC that believed that the water supply was safe for people's health. This reflects the general worries about the area's water quality and safety. Nonetheless, 21% of SCCs were adamant that the water was advantageous and safe. This disparity in opinions highlights the need for more thorough water testing and public health programmes by raising serious concerns about the dependability and quality of the local water supply. Undoubtedly, having access to clean and safe water is a fundamental human right. Another infrastructure-related worry is Kiambiu's water tower availability. Of the SCCs surveyed, only 14% strongly agreed that there were enough water towers; a sizable majority (43%) disagreed, and none felt that the infrastructure of the water towers was adequate. The fact that just 18 of Kenya's 88 recognised water towers are fully gazetted exacerbates the lack of infrastructure and worsens the problems with water access. Furthermore, 21% strongly disagreed and 64% of SCCs disagreed that it was easy to acquire water in the neighbourhood, illustrating the daily problems that the locals experience.

There does not seem to be much community support for solving the problems with water access. In response to a question on whether their communities assist one another in obtaining clean water, a majority of 57% disagreed, with only 7% agreeing and 14% strongly agreeing. This suggests that broader structural factors, including poor governance or inadequate infrastructure, may be impeding local attempts to enhance water access. The water issue in Kiambiu is made more difficult by the surroundings. Significantly, 85% of SCCs voiced worries about the detrimental effects of tree dispersal on subterranean water sources, citing environmental deterioration as a major contributing factor to water resource contamination and depletion. Community participation in water-related advocacy also remains low. Although eight SCCs took part in World Water Day, only 7% of SCCs strongly supported local participation in the event, with 57% opposing it. This low engagement rate may be attributed to factors such as limited outreach, socioeconomic challenges, or competing local priorities. Increased community involvement in events like World Water Day could help raise awareness and drive collective action to address the pressing water issues in the area.

The pastoral cycle framework can be used to assess the findings on the water access difficulties of the Kiambiu community in an efficient and effective manner. The responses from the SCCs provide a basis for the first stage, which is based on the community's lived experiences. Their personal testimonies of the difficulties they experience with infrastructure, access, and water safety highlight the pressing need to resolve these issues. This phase documents the day-to-day Kiambiu community experiences. Based on the SCCs' response, the community is investigating the underlying reasons for the water problem at this point. Important obstacles to clean water access are noted, including inadequate

water towers, inadequate infrastructure, environmental deterioration, and governance difficulties.

The pastoral cycle provides an opportunity for the community to engage in theological discourse that addresses social justice principles and faith in connection to water rights. Faith-based organisations like the SCCs are called to fight for justice and the dignity of people because clean and safe water is a fundamental human right. In addition, the pastoral cycle helps the community develop a sense of unity and shared responsibility. Through the practice of theological reflection, the SCCs may utilise their common values to fight structural injustices that sustain unequal resource allocation while also promoting water rights. This contemplation of faith, justice, and dignity serves as a spur for transformative action, encouraging the neighbourhood to address the environmental and infrastructure problems preventing people from accessing clean water.

In order to address the water problem in Kiambiu, tangible measures or action must be taken in the final stage. The provision of equal access to water could entail taking action for improved water infrastructure, taking part in environmental conservation initiatives, and encouraging community cooperation. The low levels of involvement on World Water Day indicate that more needs to be done to get the community involved and promote awareness. The SCCs can be given the authority to take significant action to enhance water availability and safeguard the environment in Kiambiu by tying advocacy to their religious beliefs.

- *Challenges of high cost of living*

Significant issues with the high cost of living in the Kiambiu community are brought to light by the study, which also reveals the intricate interactions between poor leadership, community involvement, and sound financial management. There appears to be a gap between elected officials and community needs, as evidenced by the large majority (71%) of SCCs reporting scarce interactions with their County Assembly members. Insufficient involvement and representation from the leadership compound the difficulties encountered by inhabitants in mitigating the high expense of living, seen in overpricing. This disparity was highlighted by one SCC member, who pointed out that '*the members' infrequent presence suggested a possible disregard for their duties*'.

The majority of SCCs (93%) showed a willingness to cut back on their unnecessary spending despite the rising cost of living, and 50% strongly agreed that better financial discipline was necessary. Although more study is needed to examine the reasons for these modifications, and their viability in the face of financial strains, this suggests that the community is conscious of the significance of managing resources more wisely. A resounding majority (93%) of SCCs concurred or strongly concurred that Kiambiu residents had accepted personal accountability for addressing the high cost of living. This shows a strong commitment to social change and a sense of community. The research, however, demands a deeper examination of the dynamics at play in these communities, particularly the part played by leadership and the impact of outside assistance in converting this commitment into concrete deeds.

Remarkably, 96% of SCCs strongly disagreed with the idea that residents do not face financial hardships, underscoring the widespread effect that high living expenses have on families. This is in line with broader national views, as people have voiced discontent with policies implemented by the government, and the growing price of necessities. Furthermore, a sizable percentage (72%) of SCCs reported that different community sectors were not included in talks about budget changes, indicating a deficiency in participatory governance. This deficiency highlights a potential systemic problem, whereby community people are prevented from actively advocating for their demands and influencing the procedures that lead to making decisions.

Step 3: Theological Reflection

The third step of the pastoral cycle is theological reflection, where the Franciscan School service learning class engaged Kiambiu SCCs on theological reflection concerning integrity for a just nation based on the sovereignty of the people, the right to clean, safe and adequate water, and the challenges of the high cost of living.

- *Sovereignty of the people*

In this study, sovereignty is defined as the people's collective ability and right to self-governance, based on the moral and ethical foundations found in scripture (Romans 13:1; Proverbs 21:1). Viewed through the prism of divine responsibility, which holds that the authority bestowed upon human institutions is ultimately answerable to God's higher rules and principles, sovereignty is understood to be more than just the capacity to exercise control. According to this interpretation, genuine sovereignty entails a dedication to justice, love, and truth in order to represent the divine image that is present in every human being (Micah 6:8). Therefore, as long as it is in line with God's intention for the welfare of all, the idea of sovereignty includes the right of the people to self-determination and involvement in government. The study highlights that a nation's strength and legitimacy come from its people's commitment to moral living and righteousness, acknowledging that sovereignty is practiced within the framework of divine power (Proverbs 14:34). According to this perspective, national stability and well-being are directly impacted by the moral fibre and dedication of the populace, who bear a shared duty for sovereignty as indicated above.

The idea of integrity as it relates to a people's sovereignty is ingrained in religious debate, especially in the context of Christianity. Integrity, which is the application of moral and ethical standards, is frequently seen as a manifestation of humanity's divine nature. Integrity is strongly associated in the biblical context with the qualities of righteousness and justice, which are fundamental to a nation's sovereignty. For example, according to Proverbs 14:34, "Sin condemns any people, but righteousness exalts a nation" (New International Version, 2011). This verse suggests that a people's moral character plays a vital role in determining their status and national sovereignty. A people's sovereignty is reinforced when they uphold their integrity because they are designed by God's will and are thus protected and shown favour.

- *Clean, safe, and adequate water*

The Bible presents water as both potent and life-giving. According to Marais (2018), God's presence is seen hovering over the rivers in Genesis, producing water to sustain life and provide animals a place to live. Water's dual nature as both life-giving and potentially destructive is shown in the book of Exodus when God uses it to drown the Egyptian army and save the Israelites. According to Matthew 8:27 and Mark 4:41, Jesus exhibits His almighty power in the New Testament by calming the stormy Sea of Galilee. In addition, Jesus is referred to in John 4 as the 'water of life', providing spiritual refreshment that satisfies an unending thirst, in contrast to the actual water from Jacob's well (Marais, 2018).

Life depends on water, which connects ecology and humans (Turner, 2013; Renato, 2003). As it permeates and sustains all forms of life, it is essential to the survival of humans, plants, and animals (Marais, 2018). Article 43(1)(d) of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) states that every person has the right to clean and safe water in adequate quantities. The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (2017) stresses that access to water is a fundamental human right, which is required for both ecological and human flourishing. The United Nations (2021) stresses that access to safe, sufficient and affordable drinking water, and sanitation is a fundamental human right essential for enjoyment of life. In many cultures and religious traditions, water represents community and unity in addition to its physical and spiritual value. Water, for example, is used in many rituals as a means of rejuvenation, healing, and purification, strengthening the social ties between participants (Sullivan et al., 2023). Within the framework of the worldwide water issue, this symbolism encompasses the necessity of group efforts to protect water resources.

- *Challenges of high cost of living*

The complex interaction of economic, social, and environmental factors, many of which were made worse by the COVID 19 pandemic is responsible for the high cost of living that exists today on a global scale. Inflation has weakened the purchasing power of money as a result of factors like growing manufacturing costs, disruptions in the supply chain, and increased demand. Population growth, urbanisation, and a lack of available housing have all contributed to rising housing costs across Kenya. In urban areas, in particular, high demand and a lack of affordable housing options have driven up prices. This problem is made worse by income disparity, since lower-income households find it more difficult to keep up with the growing prices of necessities, putting strain on finances and lowering standard of living. According to Shibia (2023), the cost of living in Kenya is at its highest point since 2017. This is due to rising food prices and commodity costs, as well as falling incomes for the lower and middle classes as a result of high taxes, high unemployment, rising cost of necessities, including school fees, and environmental factors such as floods, and droughts. Kenya saw significant inflation between June 2022 and June 2023, which made matters worse.

During their assembly in November 2022, the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops voiced concerns about the impact of increasing living costs on average Kenyans, pointing

out that essential commodities are out of reach for many (KCCB, 2022). The Bishops also called for the elimination of the 2024 Finance Bill, which imposed significant tax increases which have incited hostility among Kenyans (KCCB, 2024) and contributed to the high cost of living in the Kiambiu community. In addition to having an impact on individuals and families, Kenya's high cost of living also has wider ramifications for social cohesiveness and the general well-being of communities. The stress and anxiety levels of residents have increased as a result of the mounting financial hardship, which has negatively impacted their mental health and general quality of life. In places like Kiambiu, where rates of poverty are already high, the weight of growing expenses can aggravate already-existing disparities and obstruct access to basic services like healthcare and education (Shibia, 2023; KCCB, 2022; KCCB, 2024).

Step 4: Action

The pastoral cycle culminates in action. It brings together insertion, social analysis and theological reflection.

Summary Presentation of the Results:

i. People's sovereignty: According to the survey, a sizable fraction of Kiambiu SCC members have a mistrust of government accountability, with 57% strongly disagreeing that elected officials behave in the public interest.

ii. Right to safe, adequate, and clean water: 79% of respondents disagreed or disapproved of the safety and sufficiency of the current water supply, underscoring persistent infrastructure issues.

iii. Challenges of high cost of living: In response to growing living expenses, 93% of participants felt that financial restraint was required. However, only 29% of respondents said they regularly discuss budgetary decisions with their elected officials. Qualitative reflections from community members and students supplement these findings, offering a thorough picture of the difficulties encountered.

iv. Results and the coherence of theological reflection: The pastoral cycle's integration of theological and sociological analysis is one of its main features. This study emphasises the close relationship between faith-based viewpoints and community reflections on sovereignty, justice, and economic hardships.

v. Suggestions enhancement: The study's recommendations were mostly developed using survey data and the students' reflections. Nonetheless, more suggestions from the community would improve the study's legitimacy and inclusivity. To ensure a balanced viewpoint, future research should include structured feedback sessions where SCC members present their own suggested solutions.

vi. Key recommendation: Tangaza University in collaboration with the Kiambiu SCCs should finance an entrepreneurship project for self-sustainability.

First Action in the pastoral cycle: Franciscan School and Kiambiu SCCs

By the end of May 2024, the Franciscan service learning students and the SCCs together set up action activities after the 2024 Lenten Campaign programmes. The Kiambiu SCCs undertook to take part in public participation forums on budgeting and agreed to commit to fighting corruption. The Franciscan students and Kiambiu SCC members began a tree nursery and also brought tree plants to be planted in Kiambiu. These trees will, in the long run, help in water conservation. The Franciscan students and the Kiambiu SCC officials visited the nearest county water office to get relevant information on water provision and access to the area. The Franciscan students service learning class created awareness among the Kiambiu SCC members about the annual World Water Day and encouraged them to participate in the World Water Day of 2024. In following the Lenten campaign themes, the service learning students organised a walk dedicated to discussion of sovereignty and to planting commemorative trees. The purpose for the walk was for civic education.

Second action in the pastoral cycle: experiential learning of the Franciscan service learning students from community engagement

After the five-week engagement period the students wrote a report drawn from their experience of community engagement with Kiambiu SCCs. The reports reflected their sense of increased exposure to critical thinking, and reflection on community issues. The two partners were able to exchange knowledge and shared the ideas for the betterment of the two groups. The students learned to appreciate the things they have. For example, they have clean, safe, and potable water, yet they are wasteful of it, while the Kiambiu community lacks this commodity. The students learned from the Kiambiu community to have a sense of commitment as they work towards better citizenship. They expressed how they were challenged by the Kiambiu community on how the SCCs struggle to make their ends meet financially.

Third action in the pastoral cycle: summative and formative evaluation

At the end of the five-week engagement period, the students gathered all the reflection papers into one project, known as the 'long essay', which was enriched from secondary data as well as their learning drawn from the Kiambiu community. The students' formative assessment was based mainly on reflections from the community, where they saw their work in Kiambiu as an expression of Franciscan spirituality and interconnectedness, deepening their commitment to compassion and justice. The Kiambiu community affirmed that theology grows from lived experience, where the gospel is encountered in daily struggles. Together, the Franciscan students and the Kiambiu community committed to community development rooted in social justice, aiming for equality, justice, and empowerment for all. The long essay was submitted to the lecturer at the end of the five weeks of insertion which marked the end of the course on justice, peace and human rights for the academic year 2023/2024.

Summary of Social Analysis

The analysis emphasises how the Kiambiu community's allegiance to Kenya is a reflection of their sovereignty as Kenyan citizens. Nonetheless, it is necessary to protect their rights and provide them with necessary assistance. Kiambiu's SCCs ought to vigorously defend their rights and hold public servants responsible for their deeds. They have a right to expect the state to be transparent, honest, and run efficiently (The Constitution of Kenya, 2010, 2*c*). Their capacity to influence legislation and improve their living situations can be increased by bolstering civic engagement and community advocacy. The safety and accessibility of water in the region are among the top issues brought up by the Kiambiu SCCs. Residents of Kiambiu are in serious danger of health problems due to the unsafe drinking water that is supplied. Access to sufficient and clean water is a constant problem because of the restricted and unstable water supply caused by the absence of suitable water towers. According to data gathered, a large number of people in Kiambiu find it difficult to make a meaningful contribution to expanding access to clean water.

Limitations and bias of the study

This study's failure to include viewpoints from Kiambiu's non-Christian community is a drawback. Furthermore, although the SCCs and students took an active part, there was little participation from other community stakeholders. To give a more complete picture of the effects of faith-based service learning, future studies should try to incorporate a range of perspectives from both religious and nonreligious backgrounds. This study's dependence on participant self-reported data, which could introduce biases like social desirability or selective remembering, is another drawback. It is possible that participants' answers, especially those taking part in faith-based service learning, matched perceived expectations more so than their actual experiences. By using observational techniques, interviews with independent community members, or longitudinal studies to monitor the long-term effects of faith-based programmes on students and the larger community, future research could overcome this constraint.

The study mostly emphasises the benefits of faith-based service learning, possibly ignoring unforeseen repercussions for participants. More research is necessary on topics including the power relationships between students and community members, varying expectations for service results, and the sustainability of interventions. In order to provide a more thorough and balanced perspective, future research should take a more critical stance, looking at both the advantages and disadvantages of faith-based engagement in disenfranchised populations.

Conclusion

Integrity for a just nation is a right for every citizen and focuses on using the nation to build in its people a culture of justice, peace and human rights. The integrity of the people requires that the way the people live shows their sovereignty as a people and that their conditions of living reflect their dignity as human beings. The Franciscan School's service learning programme was limited to the engagement with the 17 Kiambiu SCCs and focused on peace, justice and human rights. The service learning for the Kiambiu SCCs also incorporated the 2024 KCCB proposed Lenten themes: sovereignty of the people, safe, clean and adequate water, and challenges of high cost of living. The empowerment of the Kiambiu SCCs through the Franciscan School's service learning class exemplifies a transformative approach to community engagement, centred on the pastoral cycle. By actively involving community members in identifying and analysing their challenges, the students facilitated a collaborative environment where theological reflections informed their actions. This process not only enhanced the community's capacity to address its issues but also fostered a sense of ownership and agency among its members.

The nature of community change and transformation emerged as a dynamic interplay between local knowledge and faith-based principles, allowing for tailored solutions that resonate with the community's values and needs. Students, in turn, gained profound insights into the complexities of social justice and community development, enriching their educational experience and nurturing their commitment to service. This holistic engagement underscores the potential of educational initiatives to drive meaningful change while empowering both students and community members in their respective journeys toward growth and transformation. Together with a growing sense of hope in the community about the possibility of achieving a sustainable solution, the Franciscan School and all stakeholders need to work together for greater performance, development, and transformation in Kiambiu engagement, increasing hope of improving performance, promoting development, and accelerating transformation.

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BOOK REVIEW

Bridging Knowledge Cultures – Rebalancing Power in the Co-construction of Knowledge, Lepore, W, Hall, BL, and Tandon, R (Eds) (Brill, 2023)

Peter Clayton, Rhodes University

Bridging Knowledge Cultures is a scholarly treatment of some of the most under-studied and challenging issues facing researchers and community partners involved in community-university research partnerships (CURP is an acronym frequently featured in this edited collection).

The structures that evaluate what counts as new and fundable knowledge have evolved over a relatively long timeline, primarily driven by traditional forms of explorative, descriptive and critical analysis research, and the interests of universities, research institutions, funders, and governments. Community-university research partnerships do not always fit the established evaluation and funding structures as comfortably as more established models of research. Community based participatory research has seen positive evolution over the past two decades throughout much of the global academy, since the principles of mutual respect and mutual benefit gained traction. The contemporary move beyond the mutually respectful and mutually beneficial objectives in interactions and outcomes, towards mutual acknowledgement of ownership and authorship of knowledge, and the co-creation of new knowledge, has put community-university research partnerships into a new orbit of potential sustainability and success, but comes with additional challenges, not helped by the mismatch in established processes and norms of research and funding institutions. This book is about seeking solutions to the knowledge power inequalities that persist in the community-university research space.

In their introduction, the collection editors work from a recognition that knowledge is created everywhere by individuals and social structures, and an acknowledgement that different contexts give rise to different knowledge cultures. They provide a clear understanding of what is meant by knowledge culture, and they set about establishing a framework for subsequent chapters, which present case studies from a diversity of cultures and geographic locations.

The book goes on to argue that almost all of the key activities conducted in CURP end up being rooted in power relations of some kind, with various constituents bringing different positions of power and understanding to the working relationship. These power differentials influence not only behaviour but also create hierarchies of knowledge based upon entrenched norms and assumptions of participants. Ensuring that mutual respect and benefit pervades the knowledge domain poses one of the biggest challenges in CURP.

In an effort to understand how best to address the challenge of power imbalances, actual or perceived, between collaborating CURP partners, two of the editors of this volume embarked on an ambitious project with a global reach, carrying the same title as this book – *Bridging Knowledge Cultures (BKC)*. The research phase of the BKC project spanned the period 2020 to 2022. It drew in researchers and community partners from diverse disciplinary fields, diverse geographic locations, and diverse knowledge cultures, which provided the case studies contained in the book, and formed the basis for the data which the book assimilates into its findings. The project sought to analyse the interactions between detached, sometimes conflicting, knowledge cultures in the CURP space, and how the participant projects sought to overcome power inequalities and evolve their working processes to better accommodate them. The BKC project was built upon the existing Knowledge for Change (K4C) Global Consortium, of which community-university research partnerships are a central component and divided the geographic reach of the project into four regions – Latin America, Africa, Southern Asia, and the Global North (Canada and Europe in this case).

The underpinning value of this book is its unique analysis of knowledge cultures in the context of CURP, and its synthesis of best practices and models. Part 1 of the book provides a scholarly context for the case studies that follow, positioning the questions addressed by the BKC project against both a historical and present-day evolving philosophy of knowledge background. The chapter on a theoretical framework to bridge knowledge cultures develops an analytical basis to explain the intricacies of power dynamics and points of tension that commonly emerge in CURP interactions, and melds an extensive literature review with the range of knowledge management practices drawn from the diverse social and cultural contexts of the participating project partners.

Part 1 also includes a chapter on understanding community knowledge cultures, and the ways in which knowledge is produced, curated and spread in communities. In addition to providing an understanding of how knowledge is perceived and understood in a range of community settings, this section provides a road map for academic researchers seeking to classify, engage with, respect and benefit from expertise that resides in collaborating partners, in the form of a set of characteristics that exemplify community knowledge.

Part 2 forms the bulk of the book, and comprises a set of ten chapters, each describing a distinct case study. These chapters describe the particular CURP relationship, the overt project content, and provide an analysis of the power relations and knowledge cultures at play, offering insights and lessons learned. The case studies cover examples

from remarkably diverse cultures, religions, geographic locations, and socio-economic contexts, spanning Indonesia, Malaysia, India (2 studies), Uganda, Tanzania, South Africa (2 studies), Colombia, and Canada.

The knowledge domains of the various case studies are equally diverse – fishing expertise, heritage, health care, waste management, Indigenous knowledge systems, water practices and technologies, health education, early childhood development, and social change dynamics for historically marginalized people.

The stories contained in each chapter are interesting in themselves, representing a range of experiences, and a rich miscellany of knowledge representation systems. Commonalities and methodologies in the varied participant experiences are what the book particularly seeks to identify. The distinctive knowledge cultures of the academic and community participants in each case provide a vivid and wide-ranging data set for the project as a whole to draw from, compiling a set of transferrable best practices, and synthesizing an understanding of the bridging process itself.

The final section of the book, Part 3, is an analysis of the knowledge gleaned from the *Bridging Knowledge Cultures* project. This is a section of the book that practitioners of engaged research will identify with in numbers, as some of the challenges exposed are those which represent the divergence of institutional and national processes and norms with the needs of community based participatory research.

A chapter entitled *The Art of Bridging*, draws together and contextualises common and transferrable learning from the case studies of the previous chapters, and looks at possible bridging techniques for the mismatches that are evident between the knowledge cultures of university and community. The insights contained in *The Art of Bridging* provide tools for the reader to ensure that the primary principles in the management of multiple knowledge cultures are not overlooked. Those academic researchers who have influence on institutional, statutory funding, and policy committees within their disciplines, which are empowered to evolve processes and criteria for funding, acknowledgement, and other forms of support, will find this set of insights particularly valuable in orientating the established formal research economy towards better acknowledgment and support of work in the CURP domain. Not all of these keys to the *art of bridging* are quantifiable, and some are relatively infrequently used given their value, such as the role of boundary-spanners and interlocutors. All are essential.

The book acknowledges that the reader is likely to be unsurprised by the key findings; the goal is to provide the case evidence for how crucial these factors are and provide possibilities for bridging the gaps in knowledge cultures within the context of CURP.

The book's concluding thoughts emphasise the need for the inclusion of community voices in the conversations around biased knowledge culture relationships, and approaches to bridging them. The final message of the book is on *missing glues and hopeful futures*, acknowledging that we have seen some positive shifts in recent years, but that some important gaps remain unbridged.

Bridging Knowledge Cultures is a good read, a great reference for university researchers and community partners involved in engaged research projects, and an essential volume for those struggling with the evolution of their own institutional processes to make them more supportive of the social and epistemic justice obligations of CURP.

In the true spirit of epistemic justice, this book is an open access title, the digital version of which is distributed freely under a creative commons license.

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