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Groupwork and Afrocentric perspectives in social work education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: A transformative autoethnographic journey

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ABSTRACT

Social work with groups serves as a vital method for groupwork facilitating healing and promoting social interventions. Historically, Western theories have shaped South African social work, often overlooking indigenous knowledge and cultural practices, which has led to criticism for failing to address African sociocultural dynamics. As a result, the University of KwaZulu-Natal Social Work Department, in collaboration with the Ma'at Institute, integrated Afrocentric perspectives into the social work with groups module and practice. It is within this context that the main aim of this article is to critically explore the integration of Afrocentric perspectives into social work education and groupwork practice at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. Methodologically, this article presents a collaborative autoethnographic

study co-authored by the research collective, which consists of three Social Work lecturers and four second- and third-year Social Work students. The shared experiences of the researchers were analysed through a critical narrative approach. The findings highlight the need for a holistic framework in teaching social work with groups that incorporates African cultural and spiritual values that align education and practice with Afrocentric perspectives; this will address theory-practice gaps and improve the effectiveness of interventions in African contexts. To advance the decolonisation of the curriculum and to foster a more culturally grounded social work pedagogy, the article recommends integrating Afrocentric epistemologies and theoretical frameworks into the curriculum, promote Afrocentric research and establishing sustained partnerships with African indigenous knowledge centers.

Keywords: African indigenous communities; Afrocentricity; groupwork; indigenous knowledge system; social work education; transformation

INTRODUCTION

This article critically explores the integration of Afrocentric perspectives into social work with groups education and practice at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa through a collaborative autoethnography. Collective support and healing have long been central practices within African indigenous communities, rooted in values of collective identity and interconnectedness (Nkosi & Moyo, 2020). These communal practices, deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric, serve as a powerful tool for promoting harmony and wholeness (Mkhize, 2018). They are grounded in the belief that personhood is constituted through relational interdependence, a principle captured in Afrocentric concepts such as *ubuntu*. While these indigenous communal practices share affinities with social work groupwork, they arise from distinct ontology and epistemological foundations that requires careful engagement rather than a simple assumption of sameness.

In many African communities, collective support was not a specialised intervention, but an essential component of everyday life. It was also intricately woven into the fabric of communal living and grounded in principles of mutual support and collective solidarity. In contrast, in the social work profession groupwork has evolved into a distinct method of intervention informed by structured theories and models (Johnson, 2021; Toseland & Rivas, 2017). Northen and Kurland (2001) posit that social work with groups is primarily associated with healing and social interventions, functioning at the meso level of social work practice. While the social work with groups practice has its origins in North America and Britain, where social work as a profession began to take shape in the 1920s, it was rapidly integrated into training programmes across most continents by the mid-1930s (Brown, 1994; Giacomucci, 2021). Through groupwork the social work profession operationalised its social mission by emphasising social reform, social responsibility, democratic ideals and social action, and through fostering social relatedness and human attachment (Giacomucci, 2021).

Social work has often been criticised for being rooted in Eurocentric values that overshadow African ways of life (Aldana & Vazquez, 2020; Sewpaul, 2007). This critique advocates for a more inclusive approach that validates Afrocentric social practices, including the collective

action embodied in groupwork. The importance of transformative and context-relevant groupwork in social work education cannot be overstated, especially in the African context, where it equips practitioners to address complex social issues (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2017; Doel & Shardlow, 2017). Since it is rooted in collective action, groupwork challenges traditional individualist paradigms.

Recent studies emphasised the need to systematically integrate groupwork content into social work programmes, focusing not only on theoretical frameworks, but also through the developing practical Afrocentric group facilitation techniques and skills (Butts, 2022; Carey, 2016; Drumm, 2014; Simon & Kilbane, 2014). As social work education evolves to reflect African realities, prioritising social work with groups aligns with the principles of social justice and empowerment by creating collective spaces where marginalised individuals can share experiences, build mutual support and collaboratively advocate for change. This approach plays a crucial role in the decolonisation of the curriculum and enabling practitioners to address systemic inequalities and foster community participation (Makhanya & Zibane, 2020). Moreover, this alignment is particularly critical in South Africa, where there is a growing demand for social work education that reflects local realities and practices (Noyoo, 2021). A key critique of decolonising social work is the argument that such efforts are "delusional" and could "spell the end of social work" (Maylea, 2021). This perspective reflects broader concerns about the profession's foundational integrity. However, this critique often assumes that decolonisation requires a complete rejection of social work's core principles rather than their adaptation and expansion. Nevertheless, for this study, authors align themselves with Mathebane and Sekudu (2018), who argue that in post-colonial contexts such as Africa, the development of indigenous knowledge rests on decolonisation (deconstruction) and indigenisation (reconstruction). As a result, this article argues that decolonisation and indigenisation are critical steps towards achieving Africanisation in social work education and practice. Hence, the call for Afrocentric discourses to be incorporated into groupwork in social work practice and education.

TRANSFORMATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL TO ADVANCE AFRICAN SCHOLARSHIP

The University KwaZulu-Natal is on a transformative journey to establish itself as "the premier university of African scholarship" (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2015, pp. 01). This vision involves implementing robust curricular, pedagogical and research initiatives to achieve meaningful transformation and establish itself as a truly African university (Otu, 2012). Such transformation requires a deep awareness of an African worldview, including cosmological, ontological and epistemological perspectives (Otu, 2021). The recognition and incorporation of African knowledge systems are crucial in this process. Central to the University KwaZulu-Natal's transformation and Africanisation agenda is the strategic alignment of the social work curriculum, education and practice. Makhanya and Zibane (2020) argue that social work should reflect African contexts and empower social workers to be culturally competent and effective. Sue et al. (2015) add that cultural competence entails moving beyond one's own cultural conditioning to acknowledge and respect alternative worldviews essential for crafting culturally appropriate intervention strategies.

In line with this vision, one of the authors of this article co-founded the Ma’at Institute in 2020. The Institute is rooted in Afrocentric principles and the Ma’at philosophy, which encompasses not only justice and truth, but also the concepts of order, harmony, balance and reciprocity (Ngcobo et al., 2023). The Institute, located within the College of Humanities, has become a vital platform for advancing Afrocentric thought and pioneering Afrocentric scholarship in psychosocial services. It plays a vital role in exploring Africa’s complexities, safeguarding the production of Africa-centred knowledge, and promoting education across the College. With social work academics serving as practitioners, the Institute leads disaster-response efforts, particularly in rural and vulnerable communities affected by pandemics and natural disasters. It provides free and accessible African-centred, trauma-informed care and psychosocial services, reinforcing the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s commitment to African values, humanity and balance. The Ma’at Institute also serves as an internship site for student social workers during their practicum and for unemployed social work graduates, offering mentorship and work-based experience. In addition, it strengthens the dedication of University of KwaZulu-Natal to African values such as truth and humanity through its community-based services. Recent challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise in gender-based violence, and the April 2022 KZN floods, have had a profound impact on social work practice and education, particularly in crisis intervention and groupwork (Motloug & Mzinyane, 2023). Lessons gained from the interventions by the Ma’at Institute and the University of KwaZulu-Natal social work academics embraced these challenges and embarked on innovative educational practices as part of curriculum transformation. Active participants in this process include social work lecturers who serve as practice researchers at Ma’at Institute, as well as student social workers who completed their practicum there. This collaborative autoethnographic reflection shares the journey of curriculum transformation and practice, focusing on social work with groups within the context of these crises.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article is grounded in Afrocentric theory, which conceptualise Afrocentricity as a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate (Asante, 2003). The Afrocentric approach further represents a holistic system rooted in African values and ways of living expressed and reinforced through child-rearing, birth and death rituals, music, dance, storytelling, proverbs, metaphors, and the promotion of family traditions, rites of passage, naming ceremonies, and governance (Asante, 2003; Kumah-Abiwu, 2016). In discussions on group work in social work, Afrocentricity seeks to legitimise the use of African knowledge and cultures that value collectivity, reciprocity, spirituality and the interconnectedness of all beings. This means that, although group work in social work is an international method, the design and implementation of any group work targeting African communities should prioritise their interests, history, culture and experiences. Hollingsworth and Phillips (2017) explain that Afrocentrism as a theoretical perspective allows one to view feelings, knowledge and actions as a complete through from an African lens rather than as objects on the periphery of European and Western experience. Therefore, the implication for education and practice is that group work pedagogy must be rooted in Afrocentric principles to empower all participants, including students and lecturers, for context-relevant practice in African communities. Our collaborative autoethnography serves as a practical model for this

empowering process, illustrating how personal narratives and collective analysis can connect theory and practice.

The application of the Afrocentric theory yields relevance in terms of both methodological and theoretical approaches as applied in this article. Methodologically, the article adopted a qualitative collaborative autoethnography (CAE), which is aligned to Afrocentric points of departure that utilise personal narratives, storytelling and reflections which are central to African ways of life. Furthermore, the relevance of Afrocentricity is justifiable as it offers a useful analytical theoretical lens. Afrocentric discourse as applied to social work with groups also underpins the philosophy within which the operations of Ma'at Institute are grounded.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative CAE methodological approach to research. The CAE allows participants to explore their own lived experiences within a specific cultural context while contributing to a broader understanding of cultural and social phenomena (Lapadat, 2017). This methodology aligns with Afrocentric epistemologies, which prioritise the integration of personal, community and cultural knowledge as essential elements in research and learning. Perumal et al. (2021) explain CAE as a research methodological design involving personal autoethnographic narratives, which facilitate an analytical understanding of the activities in which one participates. Through CAE, shared experiences reveal systematic oppression and cultural scripts, which can be better understood through multiple lenses focused on the individual and shared aspects of those experiences (Lapadat, 2017; Zhang, 2019). At the core of CAE is collaboration, where all participants actively contribute their narratives. Perumal et al. (2021) assert that CAE involves personal reflections and narratives that foster a deeper understanding of the social realities that individuals engage with. In the context of this study, CAE was best suited to the exploration of Afrocentric groupwork education, as it allowed the researchers to reflect on their experiences of integrating Afrocentric perspectives into groupwork modules. The participatory nature of CAE facilitates a collective exploration of how Afrocentricity has influenced our teaching and learning, drawing attention to the cultural, spiritual and practical dimensions that are sometimes overlooked in Western-centric social work education. This study incorporates elements of action research in its aim to transform pedagogy and empower its members. However, its primary method remains collaborative autoethnography, as the focus is on the collective, systematic analysis of our shared personal experiences to understand the integration of Afrocentricity into our teaching practice.

Motlounge and Mzinyane (2023) presented three building blocks of collaborative autoethnography, including collaboration, autobiography and ethnography. Beyond the three building blocks, Malorni et al. (2023) assert that CAE has five key features, which include self-visibility, strong reflexivity, engagement, vulnerability and closure. The five key features of CAE, as outlined by Malorni et al. (2023), were integral to the methodological framework of this study. These features enabled the researchers and students to critically engage with their cultural and professional identities, contributing to a richer understanding of how Afrocentricity reshapes social work education. The inclusion of both student and lecturer reflections created a multi-layered narrative, allowing for a holistic exploration of the discourse on Afrocentric social work with groups.

CAE can start from various points, such as the need to reflect on a traumatic event or as an intentional discussion on shared experiences (Blalock & Akehi, 2018). For this article, the use of CAE began with the need to reflect on our experiences when Afrocentric groupwork was taught during the Working with Groups social work module. During the lecture session, all social work students were encouraged to reflect on their cultural backgrounds, the group dynamics and the challenges of applying Afrocentric principles in real-world contexts. They shared their reflections on experiences of Afrocentric groupwork practice, and how they connect Afrocentric education to the practice of social work with groups. The students were also given an opportunity by the Ma'at Institute to complete their social work practicum and were exposed to groupwork practice centred on the Afrocentric paradigm. Furthermore, the researchers reflected on their experiences of teaching the content of mainstream groupwork versus the Afrocentric discourse of social work with groups. The authors were also social work practice researchers at Ma'at Institute. The use of the CAE did not only allow the researchers to reflect on their experiences in teaching and learning, but also created a safe space to interact, share and analyse stories based on our diverse cultures and cultural practices as data that contribute to the expansion of African cultural knowledge in research (Malorni et al., 2023; Mzinyane et al., 2024).

The active co-researchers in this study consisted of student social workers completing their second and third years, and who are and/or were enrolled in module Working with Groups at University of KwaZulu-Natal X. The four second- and third-year social work students were not merely participants, but active co-researchers in this study, contributing equally to the generation and analysis of our collective narratives. Two researchers who co-lectured the “Working with Groups” module were part of the study. The collaboration process began during lectures with 150 second-year students. The lecturers presented a lecture on the Africanisation of groupwork practice in social work, emphasising the importance of African indigenous knowledge systems, African spirituality and the integration of these elements into social work practice. In the next lecture, the researchers invited social workers from the Ma'at Institute to inform our students on how to conduct groupwork practice from an Afrocentric perspective, whilst delivering their content in IsiZulu language and incorporating IsiZulu culture, values and ways of life. For the past six years, the “Working with Groups” social work module has been a standard part of the curriculum at University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Using convenience sampling, second and third-year social work students were then invited through an open announcement to participate in the student-led conference hosted by the South African College of Applied Psychology (SACAP) under the theme “Social Work in the Global South and North Contexts: Multicultural Student Conversations.” Three second-year and two third-year students volunteered, with one later withdrawing from participating. The remaining four students received mentorship on abstract writing and presentation from three researchers. The conference presentation was later developed into a manuscript, with all four social work students and three researchers as co-authors. The CAE approach allowed the study to capture not only individual experiences, but also the collective transformation of both students and researchers as they engaged with Afrocentric groupwork education. This reciprocity of learning, in which students and researchers co-constructed knowledge, aligns with Afrocentric

principles of collectivism and interconnectedness, which are fundamental to the theory guiding this study.

For data analysis, critical narrative analysis (CNA) was adopted as the primary approach to analysing the reflections. Souto-Manning (2012) notes that CNA allows for data analysis based on individual and collaborative narratives at both personal and institutional levels and can critique the way that institutional discourses influence and are influenced by personal everyday narratives. CNA allowed researchers to focus not only on the personal but also on the institutional level. The basic form of narrative analysis, which focuses only on personal narratives is limited and can remain at an uncritical level if it does not incorporate the critical component (Butina, 2015; Souto-Manning, 2012). In the process of CNA for this article, the researchers began by collecting personal written reflections, which led to a collaborative contextual understanding of those reflections. The following stage pertained to discourse analysis of the implications of the Afrocentric approach to social work with groups and advocating for transformation in social work education and practice. The final stage of the process entailed interpreting the reflections in line with the main aims of the study and producing a manuscript.

Research ethics were observed, including ethical clearance, voluntary participation and informed consent, among others. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Human and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of University of KwaZulu-Natal (HSSREC/00007373/2024). Informed consent is a crucial principle in social work as it embodies the principle of self-determination, which operationalises voluntary participation, autonomy, and beneficence (Ahmed, 2024; Thyer, 2016). Students and researchers who participated in this study provided verbal consent, and their participation was voluntary. One student who later withdrew from the study was allowed to do so without any consequences. The study also observed the issues of trustworthiness to ensure that the research process is rigorous and credible. To ensure credibility (Thyer, 2016), the authors engaged in continuous self- and collective reflection to identify biases and assumptions. To ensure the study's dependability, consistency and the reliability of findings (Ahmed, 2024), an audit trail was kept where all research decisions, data collection and data analysis processes were documented. To ensure confirmability Kumar (2014) looks at the degree to which research results could be confirmed or corroborated by others. The researchers engaged in group coding sessions, where authors collectively analysed and interpreted data to eliminate bias.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS

The reflections provided in this section are from co-researchers and from researchers.

Student reflections

The four co-researchers who participated in the study provided the following reflections and experiences.

Reflection 1:

I think the Afrocentric education to groupwork has given me a real picture of what is happening in African communities. In the future, we will be working with a lot of people, so

it gives us an idea of which routes to take when working with people and how to speak to them in a way that they will understand and in a way that they will feel involved and respected. More than the Afrocentric discourse, groupwork emphasises the important element of spirituality that Western education does not recognise.

The element of spirituality is fundamental to Africans, as most people's lives are defined by their spirituality and the impact it has on their lives, including how they should behave, understand, and interact with the world. So, I think the concept of spirituality really broadened my understanding that when we work with people, we should also consider spirituality and help our clients in a more holistic and moralistic way that is acceptable in the African context. (2nd year student)

Reflection 2:

My experience in groupwork has been both positive and demanding. I recall a valuable piece of advice from one of the social workers at this university, emphasising the importance of cultural competence during home visits. She encouraged us to set aside our professional roles and immerse ourselves in the community's practices. This guidance shaped our approach when working with children, as my co-facilitator and I adopted a mindset geared towards accommodating and engaging with them. Whether playing games or fostering a sense of belonging, our objective was to establish a relationship with the children. Working with children, particularly those in the foundation phase, proved to be exciting when they were called for our groupwork. It was crucial that we were aware of their enthusiasm, reminding them that, although we were outside, our purpose was educational. Recognising that we were once in their shoes, facing similar challenges, we sought not to be overly strict, but instead creative and considerate. This approach required us to be aware of our own past traumas that might surface during interactions with the children. Integrating theory into practical situations when working with African groups is challenging due to the complexities of real-world dynamics, individual differences within groups, communication and collaboration, and ethical considerations. The transition from theoretical knowledge to real-world application required us to adapt to real community real issues, flexibility, and an understanding that practical issues may differ significantly from the structured environment of the theoretical framework we learned in class. (2nd year student)

Reflection 3:

My experience has been good because I had a reasonable number of school learners who thought it was larger than what is referred to as a "professional group," so it was easy to facilitate. I think the Eurocentric education we receive in social work makes us more clinical practitioners even when conducting groups. I say it was more Eurocentric because we are trained to focus on one issue at a time. In real practice, group members think they come into the group for that issue, but you realise that there are so many issues connected to the problem for which the group was created. So, I lacked the ability to see issues in a holistic way and recognise how they can also be interconnected. This is what you get to understand when you are exposed to Afrocentric education, which is still lacking in the profession. (3rd year student)

Reflection 4:

My field experience of groupwork required me to be more creative because I worked with a large number of people, more than twelve members, which is believed to be a professional group. Although I practiced in a school, schools paint a picture of what it is like in communities. The overcrowding of schools affected how I did groupwork, so I had to be creative due to the large number of students, but I still considered the ethics of social work at the same time. We had to act professionally and ethically in a particular way, but the children would look at us as parents more than as social workers. As student social workers, some children in the group would look for love, comfort, and care, and that meant that we should act in a manner that demonstrates these needs to be effective when working with them. Also, when we were conducting groups, we strangely dealt with more conflicts than addressing what we were looking for, and we could not understand where this conflict would come from with these kids, so we would need to neglect our session plans to ensure that there was peace in the group. (3rd year student)

The reflections of the students above revealed that the introduction of the Afrocentric groupwork discourse allowed social work students to reflect on African communities' dynamics and the importance of the relevance of working in their communities. Furthermore, third-year students reflected on having difficulties in translating the currently taught mainstream groupwork knowledge into real-world practice and how the group dynamics necessitated an Afrocentric understanding of the experiences of African people.

Researchers' reflections

The social work lecturers reflected on their experiences and observations based on their sense of how the students received the Afrocentric approach to groupwork. Below are the reflections of the lecturers.

Reflection 5:

When I started working as a lecturer at University of KwaZulu-Natal there was nothing, no discourse on Afrocentricity in social work or that at least attempted to understand social work from the viewpoints of an African person. This bothered me because in this university we have a majority of our students being African and coming from African communities, yet we hardly relate social work to their context and ways of life. As an African lecturer who believes in Afrocentricity, I introduced the Afrocentric approach to groupwork because I wanted to test how students would receive it. I delivered my content to second-year students and for the first time, I saw my students engage robustly with the content, making examples and even providing perspectives of how they live in their communities, and groupwork may be understood. From that lecture, I also became a student because I learned from my students. I was not the person who was seen as the source of knowledge. From there, I saw how education in social work is better understood when Africanised. (Senior social work researcher)

Reflection 6:

Social work with groups was one of the first modules that I taught as a newly contracted lecturer at University of KwaZulu-Natal. I was familiar with the content of groupwork because I went through the same training as an undergraduate. When we made the decision as lecturers to invite the Ma'at Institute to give a lecture on the Afrocentric approach to groupwork, we became students as well. What was interesting was seeing how comfortable students were with the content and how eager they were to engage with it. As a lecturer, I was making critical reflections as the lecture session was ongoing because I assumed that students would not accept the discourse. I saw how the use of African songs, sounds, values, and the Ma'at Institute philosophies of harmony, balance, truth, and others could be infused into the groupwork practice. From this experience, I saw how it is possible to fully bring the curriculum of social work to Afrocentrism because it is mostly relatable and practical for African students and clients. I realised that the lecture room was transformed to be inclusive and accommodating for students from all walks of life. The use of IsiZulu in class opened up the space for those students who are always silent in class to freely express themselves and be active in their learning discourse. (Social work researcher)

Reflection 7:

As a social work lecturer of Indian descent, teaching Afrocentric approaches in groupwork practice to my students was both meaningful and developmental. Honestly, I was not entirely sure of myself. I had taught the groupwork module many times before, but more in a conservative manner. However, during this module, we decided to introduce Africanising groupwork practice to students, and I found myself questioning how I would provide the appropriate understanding and context for my students. Fortunately, my role as a mentor at the Ma'at Institute allowed me to learn and recognise the core principles associated with Afrocentrism. The principles of Ubuntu, collectivism, and interconnectedness became central to my teaching. Through these new and meaningful classes, students were able to recognise the experiences of African people which was central to understanding many of the social issues in the South African context. To strengthen our teaching practice, guest speakers from the Ma'at Institute were invited to our classes. This allowed for the voices of African experts. Through such engagement, our class was transformed. The students were thrilled by this transformation of groupwork discussions. They felt safe and included in the class. They were able to explore culturally relevant and culturally competent social work practices. For me, teaching this module provided a new willingness to learn and a genuine respect for the experiences African communities. (Social work researcher)

The lecturers' reflections highlight the constraints of a Eurocentric education and the ethical challenges of working with diverse populations. While the lecturers reflected on the constraints of Eurocentric education and challenges working with diverse groups, the researchers in this study noted positive student involvement and inclusivity when African philosophies, languages and cultural traditions were incorporated. Overall, these reflections highlight the transformative capacity of Afrocentric social work education in enhancing cultural competence and promoting holistic, contextually meaningful practice.

DISCUSSION

The integration of Afrocentric perspectives into the education of social workers at University of KwaZulu-Natal is a major step towards addressing the unique sociocultural dynamics of the African community. Historically, social work education in South Africa has been influenced primarily by Western theories, often without taking into account the indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices (Aldana & Vazquez, 2020; Sewpaul, 2007). This oversight has led to growing criticism of the relevance and effectiveness of social work interventions in local contexts. Consequently, social workers were encouraged to adopt an African model, which emphasised the elimination of oppression and spiritual alienation (Hollingsworth & Phillips, 2017). The initiative to integrate African principles into the curriculum, particularly in the groupwork modules, aims to address this gap by promoting and fostering cultural competencies among future practitioners. The Afrocentric debate on groupwork in Afrocentric social work promotes effective thinking, combats political, economic and cultural oppression, consolidates community strength, and fosters effective professional relationships and mutual professional relations (Mungai, 2015).

The reflections reveal that an Afrocentric discourse in social work with groups at University of KwaZulu-Natal drove a significant transformative agenda for social work students and lecturers. Afrocentric social work intends to assist in transforming people from adopting suboptimal thinking to optimal thinking, which implies holistic and relational consciousness (Mungai, 2015). As evidenced in the interviews, the integration of Afrocentric perspectives transformed teaching and learning processes, which became characterised by reciprocity, shared authority, and contextually meaningful engagement. This is illustrated in Reflection 5:

... for the first time I saw my students engage robustly with the content, making examples and even providing perspectives of how in their communities they live, and groupwork may be understood... I also became a student because I learned from my student. I was not the person who was seen as the source of knowledge.

Similarly, a second-year student reflected in Reflection 1: “...the Afrocentric education to groupwork has given me a real picture of what is happening in African communities” Together, these reflections demonstrate that centring Afrocentric perspectives disrupted hierarchical knowledge relations, repositioned lived experience as legitimate knowledge, and fostered a more dialogical, culturally grounded, and transformative pedagogical space.

The integration of African principles into the curriculum, particularly in the groupwork modules, responds to the epistemic gap by promoting and fostering cultural competencies among future practitioners, while indigenising the social work curriculum. Groupwork in social work is essential for empowering members, fostering motivation, developing social skills and providing mutual support, but it must be adapted to the specific context (Pullen-Sansfaçon & Ward, 2014). However, an Afrocentric discourse in groupwork would allow the empowerment of African communities to uphold their right to self-determination and promote their interests, while breaking down the boundaries between the helper and the helped; in mainstream social work this would be regarded as professional heresy or de-professionalisation (Mungai, 2015; Pullen-Sansfaçon & Ward, 2014; Schiele, 1997). Hence, Reflection 2 by a second-year student

reveals that “*The transition from theoretical knowledge to real-world application required us to adapt to real community real issues, flexibility, and an understanding that practical issues may differ significantly from the structured environment of the theoretical framework we learned in class*”. Furthermore, a third-year student reflected in Reflection 3:

I think the Eurocentric education we receive in social work makes us more clinical practitioners even when conducting groups... In real practice, group members think they come into the group for that issue, but you realise that there are so many issues connected to the problem for which the group was created.

Therefore, the Africanisation of groupwork discourse in the social work curriculum and education would yield social work practitioners who are adequately equipped to “*explore culturally relevant and culturally competent social work practices*”, as indicated by a social work lecturer in Reflection 7. This shift does not only enrich the educational experience, but it also aligns with the broader goal of decolonising social work education and ensuring that it resonates with the realities of African communities, while contributing to a more inclusive and equitable educational environment and fostering social justice and empowerment in the field.

Additionally, by strengthening the curriculum in terms of Afrocentricity, University of KwaZulu-Natal is making considerable progress towards producing culturally competent practitioners equipped to address the complexities of social issues within African communities. Lateef et al. (2023) posit that an Afrocentric education is critical to students’ development in several areas, including confidence development, intragroup bonding, resilience, community involvement and a sense of responsibility. At the centre of the Afrocentric discourse to social groupwork is the intentional use of African indigenous knowledge systems and the use of African languages. This is indicated in Reflection 6 by the social work lecturer, who observed that during the session there was

the use of African songs, sounds, values, and Ma’at philosophies of harmony, balance, truth, and others... The use of IsiZulu in class opened space for those students who are always silent in class to freely express themselves and be active in their learning discourse.

Furthermore, the Afrocentric education enabled the social work students to understand the importance of emotional connection to their clients when conducting groupwork with, for example, school learners. The social work student reflected in Reflection 4 that

we had to act professionally and ethically in a particular way, but the children would look at us as parents more than as social workers. As student social workers, some children in the group would look for love, comfort and care, and that meant that we should act in a manner that demonstrates these needs to be effective when working with them.

This reflection aligns with Schiele’s (1997, p. 813) assertion that “for Afrocentric social work, emotional distance is seen as unproductive because it prevents the complete development of a trusting, authentic helping relationship”.

The collaborative autoethnographic approach employed in this study allows for a rich exploration of the lived experiences of students and researchers. The participants’ narratives reflect how an Afrocentric education has reshaped their understanding of groupwork,

emphasising the importance of spirituality and community engagement. Students were more perceptive to the material when it was contextualised in terms of their cultural realities and highlighted the need to integrate African values and practices into their training. This not only enhanced their practical skills, but also cultivated a sense of belonging and relevance in their education. An Afrocentric education transformed the researchers' teaching methodologies to include Afrocentric perspectives. Researchers noted a marked increase in student participation and enthusiasm, as the curriculum became more relatable and applicable to the students' backgrounds. This shift not only enriches the educational experience, but also aligns with the broader goal of decolonizing social work education, ensuring that it resonates with the realities of African communities. Both students and lecturers highlighted a critical need for social work education to evolve in response to local contexts. This approach does not only enhance the relevance of social work practice, but also contributes to a more inclusive and equitable educational environment, fostering social justice and empowerment in the field.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This article set out to demonstrate the significance of Afrocentric perspectives to social work with group education and practice. Three key recommendations are made.

1. There is a need to integrate Afrocentric discourses with contemporary social work with group education and practice in the South African and African context. This integration could ensure that the practice of social work with groups in the African context is culturally and contextually relevant. The integration of an Afrocentric discourse also contributes to indigenising social work education and practice so that the profession can embrace diverse cultures and contexts (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017; Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018). Additionally, the integration of Afrocentric discourses should also target other key methods of social work intervention, such as community work and casework, so that there can be an alignment between education and practice. This implies that the intentional transformation of the contemporary social work curriculum should be more sensitive to African realities and context.
2. More empirical research is needed on the incorporation of Afrocentric discourses into social work with groups into student learning and practice. Through extensive empirical and evidence-based research, Afrocentric theories, models and approaches can be developed for the practice and education in social work with groups. The research on Afrocentric discourse in social work with groups should prioritise amplifying participants' voices, recognising the uniqueness of their experiences and the importance of their stories in knowledge generation, while at the same time showing respect to individuals and communities. This could promote healing while advancing transformation through the incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems.
3. The establishment of strategic partnerships with social work centres, institutes and organisations such as the Ma'at Institute that needs to be grounded in African indigenous knowledge. These strategic partnerships are crucial for social work practice and education in terms of the co-creation of knowledge. These strategic partnerships can be instrumental in providing opportunities for research centres instrumental in advancing academic and evidence-based social work literature. Furthermore, the collaboration offers students and

academics first-hand knowledge from practitioners who specialise in the application of Afrocentric methods, thereby improving their learning experience and encouraging the integration of Afrocentric practices into fieldwork placement.

CONCLUSION

Incorporating Afrocentricity into social work education, especially in groupwork, is crucial for developing culturally skilled social work practitioners who meet the diverse and multidimensional needs of African communities. This article sheds light on the experiences of social work students and lecturers at University of KwaZulu-Natal, highlighting the significance of Afrocentric approaches on groupwork education. The findings revealed that students are more receptive to the curriculum content when it reflects their cultural environments, while lecturers experienced greater engagement and enthusiasm among students. These developments highlight the need to decolonize social work education to ensure it aligns with the experiences of African communities. Although the article's content focuses on social work with groups, these developments can also address gaps between social work theory and practice. Social work education in Afrocentric groupwork provides a powerful framework that promotes cultural competence, collectiveness and community strength, which are vital in the South African context. By partnering with the Ma'at Institute, founded on Afrocentric principles, the groupwork module facilitated the enhancement of African-centred knowledge. This collaboration further enriched the academic journey by involving African experts in the social work curriculum. Integrating African languages, spiritual beliefs and cultural practices reshaped the learning setting, making it more inclusive of and applicable to Black students. Ultimately, this article stresses the importance of ongoing efforts to incorporate Afrocentric perspectives into social work education programmes. Doing so provides future social work professionals with the cultural competency to effectively navigate the social and cultural dynamics of African communities. However, it is also important to note the limitations of this approach, such as its focus on one social work module and its concentration on a specific university setting. Additional research is necessary to determine whether these findings apply to other African educational settings. Nonetheless, this study adds significantly to the expanding body of work on Afrocentric social work education and its role in advancing social work interventions in African communities.

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