

Decolonising teaching and research : a student buddying programme between Burundi and the UK

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Abstract

Social work departments at Hope Africa University (Burundi) and Oxford Brookes University (UK) created an innovative buddying programme for their students. The project design and evaluation was based on the Burundian principle 'Ikibiri' (working together) and the African principle 'Ubuntu' (I am because we are). Although this project stemmed from the need to decolonise curricula in the UK, it was mutually beneficial: students from both institutions learned about social work from another culture and strengthened their communication skills. Evaluation of the project took a decolonial lens, attempting to examine the extent to which students experienced a sense of Ubuntu. This chapter will share lessons learned in attempting to decolonise teaching and research, and inspire others to do the same.

Key words:

Buddying, Ubuntu, social work, decolonising, student partnerships

Research context

The social work team at Oxford Brookes University (OBU), UK, has worked on developing a decolonised curriculum since 2017. We are building on global strategic priorities for social work, informed by principles inherent in the Sustainable Development Goals (Childs, 2023). Social work education typically attracts a high proportion of students from the global ethnic majority, especially Black African/Afro-Caribbean students (c. 33%), compared to OBU and UK higher education (HE) averages (c. 6%). Our initial work attempted to understand poorer overall experiences and degree outcomes of global ethnic majority students (Bunce et al., 2021). This evolved into a broader project to embrace decolonial theory from the Global South (Childs & Clarke, 2022) and go beyond the 'decolonial bandwagon' and its multiple limitations (Moosavi, 2020).

Our move towards a more truly decolonialised approach was greatly supported by Susan Muchiri from Hope Africa University (HAU), Burundi. Our cross-cultural collaboration began at a social work conference in Rwanda, where we sought to create an African partnership to expand and enrich our work (Childs et al., 2023). This has

inspired and enabled us to promote indigenous values of the Global South, such as interconnectedness, sharing, and mutual respect. We now draw on the African paradigms of '*Ubuntu*', 'A person is a person through others', and '*Ikibiri*', the 'spirit of coming together for the good of the individual and the community' (Muchiri et al., 2019). These paradigms speak to collectivistic values based on the concept of coming together to succeed, which have a strong resonance with social work values. Our goal is to cultivate an environment that enables all students and staff members to inhabit a space, to the extent that one can say, 'This is my home. I am not a foreigner. I belong here' (Mbembe, 2016).

Literature

We have drawn on a large body of literature, including Global South research on *Ubuntu* and *Ikibiri*, and their relevance to social work (e.g., Muchiri et al., 2019; Mupedziswa et al., 2019) and education (e.g., Mugumbate et al., 2023; Waghid, 2020; Biraimah, 2016). Muchiri et al. argued that *Ikibiri* can play an important role in social work practice, as both focus on the social nature of societies and how to resolve social issues. By promoting solidity, cohesion, and collaboration, social workers can use *Ikibiri* to draw communities together, encourage and empower people, and help to find ways of overcoming societal conflicts and challenges. Although focused on East Africa, their findings could also be valuable for social work in the Global North. Similarly, Mupudziswa et al. proposed that *Ubuntu* has great potential as a guiding framework for social work in Africa, describing how the profession and the paradigm share a great deal of their vision, mission, values, and principles.

Mugumbate et al. (2023) described the roles of *Ubuntu* in social work education in Africa, arguing that it provides a useful and appropriate philosophical foundation for training social workers. They outlined how it facilitates optimal forms of reciprocal teaching and learning, indigenises and decolonises the curriculum, and provides students with useful skills for practice. They also detailed how it could benefit social work globally. Waghid (2020) and Biraimah (2016) discussed the potential benefits of applying *Ubuntu* to the development of African higher education and school education respectively, with the latter focusing specifically on Namibia.

Our literature search did not, however, find any studies that offered empirical evidence of the effects of drawing on *Ubuntu* and *Ikibiri* in social work education in the Global North, or of facilitating opportunities for social work students from the Global North and Global South to collaborate and learn from each other. Our project was therefore designed to address this gap, and to advance understanding and development of novel and innovative ways to decolonise social work curriculums.

Objectives and methods

We created an online buddying programme for OBU and HAU social work students. The specific objective was to enhance students' sense of *Ubuntu* by working together (*Ikibiri*) to understand cultural similarities and differences between social work in each country. The aims of the programme were to promote intercultural awareness, open-mindedness, and collaboration, and to support the development of culturally sensitive social work practice.

The use of an international buddying programme grounded in indigenous models from the Global South is a unique way to develop an anti-racist environment that furthers

the decolonisation of social work curriculums on a national and international scale. Our research question was: 'Could participation in the buddying programme support students' sense of *Ubuntu*'.

The buddying scheme is in its third year. In total, 24 students each year (12 from each institution) meet up to 6 times online in small groups to discuss a range of predetermined topics. The sessions enable participants to get to know each other, discuss their educational experiences, and discover what social work involves in their countries. The sessions have been mostly conducted in English because HAU students are taught in English, although their primary language is French. One buddying group held parts of some sessions in French, because an OBU student could speak French and translated for both groups.

To evaluate the scheme, all students on both courses were invited to complete a short online questionnaire that measured their sense of *Ubuntu* (see Mutsonziwa, 2020). We invited students to complete the questionnaire before and after the scheme, but received low numbers of responses from the latter, so combined the pre- and post-participation data. The questionnaire was translated into French for HAU participants. Students responded to 17 items on a 5-point scale whereby 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Example items included, 'You treat other people with dignity', and 'Your life is richer because you share it with other people'. Students also provided qualitative feedback on the scheme. Ethical approval was obtained from OBU for all students because ethical approval processes were not in place at HAU.

Analysis and findings

In line with our aims, we established that the buddying groups facilitated intercultural exchange between students studying social work in two different countries. Student comments on the scheme supported this, for example:

"Our session this morning, where we talked about humanity, was really inspiring. It is indeed the essence of life. Looking forward to our next session" (HAU student).

Another student said:

"I totally enjoyed this meeting as I was able to learn from the others and received answers to my questions about what social workers do in Burundi" (OBU student).

One student described the value of learning about *Ubuntu*:

"I do think I increased my understanding of *Ubuntu* and I applied it to my first social work placement. [...] It is a nice concept, and should be applied more in social work settings, so I found it extremely useful to learn about" (OBU student).

Although she noted that *Ubuntu* was not mentioned explicitly by the HAU students, she observed that:

"I think there is a sense of community and social mobilisation in African societies that forms a social bond and well-being, and that interventions [...] in these contexts are very much around the community to improve individual well-being. I don't think that happens to the same extent in social work in the UK—we very much focus on the individual, and the family as an extension—so I do inherently think that the Burundi students may 'live it' without labelling it" (OBU student).

In terms of the *Ubuntu* questionnaire, 38 students from OBU and 69 students from HAU completed it. Unfortunately, response errors meant that it was not possible to separate responses from students who participated in the buddying scheme from those who were studying social work on the two courses, but who did not participate in the scheme, therefore we looked at data from all students combined. The mean *Ubuntu* score of OBU and HAU students was almost identical (OBU $M = 4.36$, $SD = .55$; HAU $M = 4.36$, $SD = .47$), suggesting that all students from both courses experienced high levels of *Ubuntu*, irrespective of whether they participated in the buddying scheme.

However, there were two notable differences between HAU and OBU students for two questions (see Table 1). OBU students scored higher than HAU students when rating their belief in the humanity of other people, whereas HAU students scored higher than OBU students when rating whether they like living together with others.

Question	OBU	HAU
You believe in the humanity of other people	4.68 (.57)	3.96 (1.21)
You like living together with other people	3.63 (1.22)	4.62 (.73)

Table 1: Means (and standard deviations) of student responses from Oxford Brookes University (OBU) and Hope Africa University (HAU) to two questions from the *Ubuntu* questionnaire.

Further work is needed to explore the validity of attempting to measure *Ubuntu* using this online questionnaire, and to explore whether the mere presence of the buddying scheme in each department had a positive benefit for all students, including those who did not take part.

Strengths and limitations

In terms of strengths, we created an innovative scheme that valued and prioritised theoretical perspectives from the Global South. Students were very willing to participate, and brought with them a rich knowledge base of their country and cultural practices which they shared openly and honestly. They appreciated the opportunity to find out how learning is structured in a different cultural context, gave regular feedback to the leader about their learning, and raised key information to bring to the attention of their wider teaching team and peer group.

The groups were conducted in English, which gave HAU students the opportunity to practise and develop their English skills. Although English has a problematic hegemonic position, fluent English is considered essential for Burundian academics (Nduwimana, 2020), and HAU's vision is to encourage bilingualism in its students, putting them at an advantage for moving within different African countries. For the group that conducted parts of some sessions in French, this was a good opportunity for OBU students to experience communication challenges firsthand, and to collaboratively develop ways of overcoming them.

Limitations included power dynamics, stemming from historical colonial injustices, including the comparative wealth of UK students and disparities in technology access. A major challenge for HAU students was internet connectivity and obtaining suitable devices to access the internet. Holding the groups in English created communication

challenges for some students. The group timing was challenging due to different academic year schedules, for example, the academic year at HAU begins in February then restarts in August, whereas at OBU it begins in September and restarts in January. This meant that students had limited times to meet when not in assessment periods or away from university, and some dropped out owing to frustrations at finding appropriate times.

Impact and steps

This project set out to further decolonise social work curriculums in the UK and Burundi, and create an anti-racist environment through an international buddying programme that promoted the indigenous Global South models of *Ubuntu* and *Ikibiri*. Specifically, it aimed to enhance students' sense of *Ubuntu* and increase their understanding of social work in each country through collaborative work (*Ikibiri*). Students from both OBU and HAU appeared to benefit from the programme, gaining increased intercultural awareness and collaborative skills, and the *Ubuntu* questionnaire indicated that all students experienced high levels of *Ubuntu*, although further research is needed to determine whether participation or the mere presence of the scheme had this effect. As well as the individual benefits gained by students, the scheme benefited both departments and universities in various ways, such as helping them to move away from dominating perspectives of the Global North towards the indigenous values of the Global South. Any work that supports local solutions to capturing indigenous approaches in social work education, informed by the principle of *Ubuntu* along with the implementation of other indigenous ideas, is of high future value. Therefore, the answer may lie in work that transforms curriculums and prioritises the importance of locally based solutions that apply ideas from non-western contexts in an international context. Applying these in social work education may have the potential to shape future decision making of regulators, higher education leaders, policymakers, teachers, and practitioners of social work in both the UK and Africa (Childs, 2023).

The next steps of advancing our work will involve:

- Engaging in further research on the concept of *Ubuntu*, including investigation of the validity of Mutsonziwa's (2020) questionnaire and other potential ways to assess *Ubuntu*. This will be highly beneficial for future projects at national and international levels.
- Overcoming more fundamental challenges in the overall development of social work curriculums. There exists a heavy reliance on Anglo-American theory, literature, and practice in UK and East African contexts, and although changes are being made to teaching materials, more fundamental transformations need to take place. At OBU, for example, we intend to draw on our learning from the buddying scheme to embed *Ubuntu* philosophy more deeply into our curriculum and ways of teaching, instead of engaging in more superficial decolonising actions such as simply trying to diversify reading materials.
- Promoting in both countries the value of supporting indigenous approaches in social work education. At OBU, for example, we intend to enable students to draw on and apply *Ubuntu* in their placements and careers, and be able to share the merits of this with colleagues and clients on a much wider scale.

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