



Intertwining Critical Pedagogy and Ubuntu: The Essence of Reshaping and Contextualising Ethical Education in Postcolonial States

Zhakata Revi¹, Zireva Davison²

¹Department of Educational Foundations, University of South Africa.

²Department of Educational Foundations Morgenster College of Education (Associate of University of Zimbabwe).

***Corresponding Author:** Zhakata Revi, Department of Educational Foundations, University of South Africa.

Abstract: This study explores the efficacy of integrating Ubuntu philosophy and critical pedagogy in shaping ethical and contextually relevant education system in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Anchored in the phenomenology paradigm and critical narrative inquiry, the research investigates how Ubuntu's communal ethics complement critical pedagogy in emphasising dialogical learning and social justice in teacher education. The study situates this intersection within Zimbabwe's Education 5.0 framework, which seeks to align higher education with innovation, industrialisation, and heritage recovery. Findings reveal that intertwining Ubuntu and critical pedagogy nurtures communal responsibility, critical consciousness, and entrepreneurial skills among teacher education students, fostering transformative educational practices. However, tensions emerge around the essentialist versus transformative applications of Ubuntu, and challenges persist in fully operationalising Education 5.0's goals. The research underscores the significance of heritage-based education as a vehicle for reclaiming African epistemologies and supporting sustainable development. This study precipitates scholarly debates on decolonial education by advocating for curriculum reforms that focus on African values, critical thinking, and innovation. Ultimately, the findings highlight the efficacy of combining Ubuntu and critical pedagogy in fostering an education system responsive to historical realities and future aspirations of the indigenes of Africa.

Keywords: Ubuntu, Critical Pedagogy, Education 5.0, Postcolonial state, Heritage Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Education in Postcolonial Africa: Legacies and Challenges

Despite political decolonisation, education systems across postcolonial Africa remain structurally and epistemologically tethered to colonial legacies. These systems privilege Western knowledge frameworks, curricula, and pedagogies that were designed for purposes of colonial control rather than intellectual emancipation (wa Thiong'o, 1986; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). The continued dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies in African education systems perpetuates a deep-seated alienation of learners from their cultural and historical realities. This disjuncture between indigenous knowledge systems and lived African experiences compromises the relevance and efficacy of education in addressing local challenges.

In the Zimbabwean context, the issue is further complicated by the medium of instruction, which is predominantly English, even in teacher education programmes that include courses on Philosophy of Education. While students are introduced to indigenous philosophies such as Ubuntu, indigenous socialism, and indigenous epistemologies, the linguistic and conceptual framing remains largely Western. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) contend that language is not merely a vehicle of communication but a carrier of world views, and its imposition can silence local ways of knowing. This observation is pertinent in Zimbabwe, where only in subjects like ChiShona and IsiNdebele is the language of instruction partially localised, though even there, complex concepts are often delivered in English, undermining epistemic autonomy.

Colonial education systematically privileged Eurocentric knowledge while marginalising African epistemologies. Santos (2014) refers to this as epistemicide—a deliberate erasure of indigenous

knowledge systems that leads to intellectual dependency and cultural alienation. The implications of this erasure are profound: the learners are self-estranged that is they often fail to see themselves and their communities reflected in educational content, which breeds disengagement and disempowerment. There is an urgent call for decolonisation in the education of the indigenes of Africa. Therefore, is not simply about content but also about ontological and epistemological reorientation.

Chikoko and Khanare (2012) emphasise the importance of constructing educational systems that are contextually grounded, socially just, and ethically responsive to the realities of African indigenous societies. Their argument suggests that transformative education must involve both structural change and curricular realignment. In the same vein, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) calls for a total epistemic revolution in which indigenous African knowledges and values are not appended to existing frameworks but positioned as foundational. This requires moving beyond superficial localisation to deep curricular transformation that centres indigenous philosophies as valid and generative bodies of knowledge.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Although Africanisation, Ubuntu, and heritage-based education have been increasingly discussed in national education policies, their implementation within teacher education remains largely symbolic and uncoordinated. In Zimbabwean teacher education colleges, students are introduced to Ubuntu and other indigenous philosophies in courses such as Philosophy of Education. Yet, the broader curriculum is structured in a way that prioritises Western theorists, frameworks, and methodologies (Ramose, 2002; Waghid, 2014). This paradox creates cognitive dissonance for pre-service teachers who are taught indigenous African values in one context while being assessed using Eurocentric benchmarks in another.

The pedagogical approaches employed further entrench this contradiction. The didactics in teacher education essentially focus on rote learning and high-stakes examinations, which limit the cultivation of critical consciousness and ethical reasoning (Freire, 2000; Hooks, 1994). Freire's critique of the "banking" model of education underscores how such practices reduce learners to passive recipients of knowledge. Hooks adds that without emotional and intellectual liberation, education remains a tool of oppression. These insights highlight the pressing need for teacher education to be restructured around dialogical and participatory models that nurture agency and ethical reflection.

1.3. Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study seeks to explore how Ubuntu and critical pedagogy can be synergistically employed to shape contextually relevant and ethically grounded education systems in Zimbabwe. Focusing on a selected teacher education college in Harare, the research investigates the extent to which Ubuntu is integrated into teaching practices and how it aligns with the national objectives of Education 5.0—a policy framework aimed at aligning education with innovation, industrialisation, and societal transformation (Murwira, 2019; Dembetembe et al., 2021).

The significance of the study lies in its potential to contribute to ongoing scholarly and policy debates around decolonisation, curriculum reform, and epistemic justice in African higher and tertiary education of former colonised African states. Metz (2011) argues that Ubuntu offers a moral framework capable of fostering communal solidarity and social justice in educational contexts. Eze (2010) further asserts that Ubuntu-based education can challenge the atomistic individualism of Western systems by promoting values of interconnectedness and mutual care. By bringing these philosophies into dialogue with critical pedagogy, this study aims to advance a transformative educational agenda that is both ethically robust and socially responsive.

1.4. Zimbabwe's Education 5.0 and Heritage-Based Transformation

Zimbabwe's Education 5.0 represents a paradigmatic shift in national education policy, building upon the earlier Education 3.0 model that centred on teaching, research, and community service. Under the stewardship of Professor Amon Murwira, Education 5.0 formally focuses on the two crucial pillars; innovation and industrialisation (Murwira, 2019; Mlambo & Mabugu, 2020). This expanded framework aims to transform universities and colleges into sites of problem-solving and product development, thereby linking education directly with national development.

Madondo and Mapolisa (2021) argue that Education 5.0 provides an opportunity for reimagining the curriculum to make it responsive to both global demands and local imperatives. However, they also

warn that without anchoring this innovation on indigenous knowledge systems, the reform risks of reproducing the same colonial logic it seeks to overcome is inevitable. The policy also echoes President Emmerson Mnangagwa's vision of inclusive national development encapsulated in the slogan *nyika inovakwa nevene vayo*, which stresses the role of citizens in nation-building (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). This ethos aligns well with Ubuntu's communalist values, offering a philosophical basis for heritage-driven and ethically grounded education.

1.5. Ubuntu Proffering an Ethical and Pedagogical Framework

Ubuntu is a robust philosophy which stresses more on axiological issues than any other philosophical issues. It is grounded on indigenous African conceptions of personhood, community, and ethics. Ramose (2002) conceptualises Ubuntu as an ontological and epistemological orientation that prioritises relationality, solidarity, and dignity. His perspective calls for an educational system that not only imparts knowledge but also cultivates moral rectitude in individuals. Waghid (2014) advances this view by arguing that pedagogy guided by Ubuntu encourages dialogical engagement, empathy, and democratic participation, making it particularly suited for transformative education.

Metz (2011) posits that Ubuntu offers a comprehensive moral theory that can undergird human rights and educational ethics in postcolonial societies. His work suggests that Ubuntu can serve as a counter-narrative to the liberal individualism dominant in Western paradigms. However, critical voices like Oyěwùmí (1997) and Nyamnjoh (2012) caution against uncritical celebrations of Ubuntu, noting that it can sometimes reinforce patriarchal and exclusionary norms. These critiques are essential, as they prompt a more reflexive and inclusive application of Ubuntu within educational settings, ensuring that it does not replicate the very injustices it seeks to rectify.

1.6. Structure of the Paper

The paper is organised into five major sections. Following this introduction, the next section discusses the theoretical framework, focusing on Ubuntu, critical pedagogy, decolonial theory, and revolutionary thought. The third section outlines the methodology, employing a qualitative design based on phenomenology and narrative inquiry. The fourth section presents the study's findings, structured around key themes. The final section interprets the findings in light of existing literature and offers recommendations for educational policy and practice.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Ubuntu Philosophy in Education

The axiological aspect of Ubuntu is encapsulated by the adage “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (a person is a person through other persons), which represents a foundational African ethical and philosophical worldview centred on communalism, interconnectedness, and mutual care. Ramose (2002) conceptualises Ubuntu as an ontological philosophy that stresses relationality and the communal constitution of personhood. This perspective challenges Western individualism by positing that the self only achieves full humanity through relationships with others. Ramose’s articulation advances an epistemology that is grounded in ethics and community, urging educational systems to prioritise collective well-being and moral development over mere technical knowledge. Desmond Tutu further popularises Ubuntu as a philosophy which can be employed as the basis of reconciliation and social harmony, arguing that ethical living involves empathy, compassion, and recognition of the inherent dignity in every individual (Tutu, 1999). This emphasis on empathy and ethical responsibility is particularly relevant to education, where fostering social cohesion and respect becomes a core objective. Eze (2010) deepens this analysis by framing Ubuntu as a dialogical process that cultivates understanding and moral growth through interpersonal engagement. His interpretation highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of Ubuntu, suggesting education should be participatory and reflective.

Metz (2011) contributes a rigorous moral philosophical foundation to Ubuntu, proposing it as embracing a normative ethical theory applicable to contemporary educational contexts. He posits that Ubuntu’s emphasis on shared humanity and solidarity offers a framework for addressing social justice issues within postcolonial societies. Metz’s work situates Ubuntu within global ethical discourses, bridging indigenous African thought with universal human rights while retaining its distinct communal orientation. This positions Ubuntu as philosophy with practical educational implications.

In classroom settings, Ubuntu manifests as pedagogies that prioritise communal learning, ethical reflection, and the nurturing of social responsibility. Dlamini (2015) advocates for an Ubuntu-infused pedagogy that fosters collaboration, respect, and the collective pursuit of knowledge, countering dominant individualistic and competitive educational models. Similarly, Waghid (2014) argues that Ubuntu encourages dialogical engagement and democratic participation, empowering learners to develop ethical agency. Such pedagogical approaches align well with efforts to decolonise education by centring indigenous values and relational ethics. Nevertheless, Ubuntu faces philosophical critiques. Appiah (1992) warns against romanticising Ubuntu communalism, cautioning that it risks glossing over individual autonomy and internal community conflicts. His critique invites a nuanced understanding that recognises the plurality and contestations within African philosophies. Oyèwùmí (1997) similarly critiques Universalist readings of Ubuntu, emphasizing how gender and power dynamics can be obscured when the philosophy is applied uncritically. These critiques are crucial to ensure Ubuntu remains a reflective, evolving philosophy that resists essentialism and exclusion, particularly within educational reforms.

2.2. Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy, rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, offers a transformative approach to education that emphasises dialogical learning and the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 2000). Freire's concept of *conscientisation* describes the process by which learners become aware of social, political, and economic contradictions and take action to transform oppressive realities. This pedagogy rejects the “banking” model of education, where students are passive recipients of knowledge, and instead promotes education as a practice of freedom and empowerment. Freire's framework is especially relevant in postcolonial contexts where education has historically been used to perpetuate domination. Hooks (1994) extends Freire's ideas by centring social justice and intersectionality in education. She underscores the importance of an engaged pedagogy that nurtures holistic development—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—and challenges systemic inequities in race, class, and gender (Hooks, 1994). Hooks advocates for classrooms as spaces of mutual learning and healing, where voices traditionally marginalised are amplified. Thus there is emphasis on the transformative approach. This approach calls for educators to become facilitators of critical dialogue and ethical reflection, aligning with Ubuntu's emphasis on relationality.

Giroux (2011) similarly foregrounds education as a vehicle for social justice, focusing on the role of educators as cultural workers who challenge neoliberal and capitalist influences on schooling. His critical pedagogy advocates for democratic participation and the development of critical agency, empowering students to engage with societal injustices. Giroux's work connects pedagogical theory to broader struggles for social transformation, underscoring the political nature of education. Richard Paul's critical thinking framework complements these perspectives by providing practical tools for cultivating analytical reasoning and reflective judgement (Paul & Elder, 2014). His model encourages learners to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and develop coherent arguments—skills essential for critical consciousness and ethical decision-making. When integrated with the dialogical and ethical dimensions of Freire, Hooks, and Giroux, Paul's framework enhances critical pedagogy's capacity to nurture empowered, reflective learners.

Combining Ubuntu and critical pedagogy offers a powerful synergy for postcolonial education. Ubuntu's communal ethics and relational focus ground critical pedagogy's emphasis on dialogue and liberation in African moral traditions, providing cultural legitimacy and contextual relevance. At the same time, critical pedagogy addresses the structural inequalities and power relations that Ubuntu alone may insufficiently problematise. Together, they promote an education that is not only emancipatory but also rooted in indigenous values of solidarity and mutual respect.

2.3. Decolonial and Revolutionary Foundations

The imperative to decolonise education in Africa is powerfully articulated by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), who argues for the “decolonising of the mind” through the reclamation of African languages, histories, and epistemologies. Ngũgĩ critiques the continued dominance of colonial languages and curricula as forms of intellectual and cultural domination. His work calls for education to become a site of cultural resurgence and resistance, where learners reclaim their identities and agency. This challenge to epistemic coloniality is foundational to reimagining African education.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) advances this discourse by analysing the persistence of coloniality of power in postcolonial African institutions, including education. He stresses that decolonisation must move beyond surface reforms to address deep-rooted structures of domination embedded in curricula, knowledge production, and institutional practices. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's scholarship illuminates the complexities of dismantling colonial legacies and advocates for radical epistemic transformation grounded in African realities.

Fanon's (1963) revolutionary writings on mental liberation provide an essential psychological dimension to decolonial education. Fanon underscores the necessity of breaking free from colonial mentalities and the internalisation of oppression. His advocacy for revolutionary violence as a means of reclaiming dignity, while contested, highlights the urgency of profound systemic change in postcolonial societies. Education, for Fanon, is not neutral but a battleground for identity and power. Thomas Sankara (1987) similarly situates education as a critical tool for societal transformation. His vision of "revolutionary pedagogy" emphasises self-reliance, anti-imperialism, and the mobilisation of youth as agents of change. Sankara's praxis-oriented approach insists that education must directly contribute to social justice and development, fostering a generation capable of rebuilding postcolonial nations.

Complementing these perspectives, Hountondji (1983) and Steve Biko (1978) underscore education as a revolutionary act that challenges colonial epistemologies and asserts indigenous African realities, Biko's concept of "Black Consciousness" promotes conscientization and cultural pride as prerequisites for liberation. Together, these thinkers provide a foundation for understanding education not merely as knowledge transmission but as a radical, emancipatory praxis aimed at restoring dignity and social justice. The consideration of education as an emancipatory integrates Ubuntu philosophy, critical pedagogy, and decolonial revolutionary thought to provide a comprehensive foundation for reimagining education in Zimbabwe and similar postcolonial contexts. Ubuntu offers a culturally grounded ethical lens prioritising communalism and relationality, while critical pedagogy contributes dialogical, social justice-oriented pedagogies essential for critical consciousness and systemic change. Decolonial and revolutionary thinkers deepen the analysis by situating education within broader struggles against coloniality and oppression. The convergence of these traditions supports an educational praxis that is ethically robust, contextually relevant, and transformative.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, integrating phenomenology and critical narrative inquiry to deeply explore participants lived experiences and meaning-making processes regarding Ubuntu and critical pedagogy within the framework of Education 5.0. Phenomenology was selected for its efficacy in capturing the essence of individuals' contextual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018), while critical narrative inquiry facilitated the exploration of how educational identities and practices are constructed through stories and reflections (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In succinct, the use of qualitative phenomenology and critical narrative inquiry created a platform for participants to articulate their lived experiences and reflective narratives in rich detail (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research setting was one anonymised teacher education college in Zimbabwe, chosen for its active involvement in implementing Education 5.0 principles—particularly the integration of innovation, industrialisation, and community engagement within teacher education (Murwira, 2019). This provided a relevant context to investigate how Ubuntu and critical pedagogy intersect in a transformative educational environment.

Participants included five first-year and five final-year student teachers, as well as three lecturers in the Educational Foundations department. Purposive sampling was employed to select individuals with direct experience and familiarity with Education 5.0 curriculum and pedagogical reforms, ensuring data richness and relevance (Palinkas et al., 2015). The purposive sampling enabled exploration of diverse perspectives across students and lecturers, strengthening the study's trustworthiness (Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach aligns with qualitative inquiry's emphasis on information-rich cases rather than representativeness.

Data generation comprised semi-structured interviews with lecturers, enabling in-depth exploration of pedagogical philosophies and curricular practices (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In-depth interviews

were carried out with students to capture a broader range of perceptions and experiences related to Education 5.0. Additionally, non-participant observations of teaching and learning environments were conducted to understand the context of experiences in order to authenticate and triangulate emic (informant's) data (Angrosino, 2007).

Ethical protocols were rigorously observed, including maintaining institutional anonymity to protect participant confidentiality. Informed consent from all participants was sought and this was consistent with best practices in qualitative research (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Participants were fully informed about the study's aims and assured of voluntary participation and withdrawal rights. Data analysis involved thematic coding guided by the Ubuntu-Critical Pedagogy conceptual framework underpinnings. The thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) facilitated the identification of the themes, connecting empirical data to the guiding theoretical frameworks. Themes were identified inductively and deductively, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how Education 5.0 could be realised through observing ethical and pedagogical transformations embedded Ubuntu and critical pedagogy (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings are organized around four key themes derived from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of interview transcripts and observational data. Participants are coded as follows: first-year students (FS1–FS5), final-year students (FY1–FY5), and lecturers (LEC1–LEC3). The coding ensures confidentiality while allowing distinct voices to emerge clearly. These findings link directly to the theoretical framework combining Ubuntu philosophy, Education 5.0, and critical pedagogy, and they reflect the methodological choices of phenomenology and critical narrative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

4.1. Ubuntu as basis for Pedagogical Ethics

The integration of Ubuntu in educational practice provides a basis for powerful pedagogical ethics, shaping community-based learning and classroom interactions. Students consistently described Ubuntu as fostering a deep sense of connectedness, mutual responsibility, and ethical engagement, which resonates with Ramose's (2002) conceptualization of Ubuntu as "I am because we are."

"Here, learning is not just about me. It's about all of us growing together. If one person doesn't understand, the rest of us come around to help because Ubuntu means we are connected." (FY2)

Such reflections affirm Ubuntu's role in creating a supportive, inclusive learning environment, consistent with Dlamini's (2015) pedagogy of belonging and Metz's (2011) ethical emphasis on human dignity and relationality.

First-year students similarly noted the transformative power of Ubuntu in group learning contexts:

"Group work is more than just an assignment; it's like we become family. We trust and respect each other, and that makes learning easier." (FS4)

Lecturers highlighted how Ubuntu shapes their pedagogical approaches, moving beyond cognitive knowledge transfer to nurture character and community values:

"Ubuntu shapes how I teach. It reminds me that education is about nurturing not only intellect but also character and relationships." (LEC3)

These findings confirm the literature emphasizing Ubuntu's ethical and communal foundations in African education (Ramose, 2002; Waghid, 2014). However, participants also expressed critical awareness of Ubuntu's complexities and potential limitations. Several students and lecturers reflected on the tension between an essentialist Ubuntu—idealized as harmonious and unproblematic—and a more transformative Ubuntu that acknowledges and addresses inequalities.

"Sometimes Ubuntu is spoken about as if it is perfect, but it can also hold us back, especially for women who are expected to be quiet and submissive in the name of community harmony." (FY5)

"Ubuntu can sometimes reinforce old power structures if we are not careful. We need a transformative Ubuntu that challenges exclusion and promotes justice." (LEC1)

These critiques resonate with Nyamnjoh's and Gqola's (as cited in Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013) caution against romanticizing Ubuntu and ignoring its patriarchal and power-related limitations. The findings here thus advocate for a critical, reflexive Ubuntu pedagogy that simultaneously honors African ethics and pursues social justice.

4.2. Heritage-Based Curriculum and Education 5.0

The curriculum discourse prominently featured Education 5.0, introduced by Prof. Amon Murwira, which seeks to integrate innovation, industrialisation, and heritage recovery. Participants articulated a growing but uneven understanding of this policy shift from theory to practice.

“Education 5.0 aims to link our learning to solving real problems. It encourages us to innovate while drawing on the rich knowledge of our ancestors.” (LEC2)

Student narratives reflected enthusiasm for entrepreneurial projects that valorise local knowledge and resources, embodying the innovation and heritage integration central to Education 5.0 (Murwira, 2019; Madondo & Mapolisa, 2021):

“Our project uses traditional medicinal plants to make soaps and lotions. It's exciting because we are valuing what our culture knows while creating jobs and products for today.” (FY1)

Such projects align with the aims of Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy 1 (2021–2025), which promotes education's role in industrialisation and sustainable development.

Yet, participants also revealed tensions in fully operationalizing Education 5.0's vision:

“Although we work with local knowledge in projects, most of our theories and exams are still based on Western textbooks. It feels like the system wants innovation but still trusts foreign knowledge more.” (FS3)

“Heritage is often tokenized. We mention it, but it rarely transforms the curriculum deeply. For Education 5.0 to succeed, we must centre African epistemologies not as an add-on but as foundational.” (LEC3)

These concerns reflect critical scholarship cautioning against superficial decolonisation and epistemic dominance persisting in postcolonial education (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Mlambo & Mabugu, 2020). The findings suggest that while Education 5.0 provides a promising framework, meaningful curriculum transformation remains a work in progress.

4.3. Critical Pedagogy in Postcolonial Zimbabwe

Critical pedagogy's influence was clearly articulated through learners' narratives of critical awakening, which echo Freire's (2000) notion of conscientisation and hooks' (1994) concept of education as a practice of freedom.

“At first, I accepted everything in the textbooks, but now I ask why our histories and achievements are missing. I am learning to challenge what I'm told and find our own stories.” (FS2)

The data reveal how students are developing critical consciousness by questioning dominant narratives and demanding epistemic justice—challenging whose knowledge counts within the curriculum. Lecturers were candid about the structural contradictions impeding this transformation:

“Students are encouraged to think critically, yet the curriculum and assessments still favour memorising Western theories. This contradiction silences genuine critique.” (LEC1)

Such contradictions reflect Foucauldian perspectives on power/knowledge relations that perpetuate coloniality even in decolonial efforts (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Santos, 2014). Students expressed frustration:

“We are taught to question and be free thinkers, but exams reward rote learning. It feels like the system fears real change.” (FY4)

Moreover, curriculum content analysis by lecturers revealed the marginalization of African epistemologies:

“African knowledges are often superficial, tokenized as cultural add-ons but not engaged with rigorously. This marginalisation reproduces coloniality of knowledge.” (LEC2)

These findings corroborate literature on the coloniality of power’s ongoing impact on African education (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; wa Thiong’o, 1986). They highlight the critical role of educators and learners in pushing for epistemic justice within postcolonial classrooms.

4.4. Ubuntu intertwinement with Critical Consciousness

A powerful theme emerging from the data was the complementarity of Ubuntu’s communal ethics and critical pedagogy’s emancipatory consciousness, illustrating how these frameworks jointly foster transformative education praxis.

“Ubuntu teaches us to care and connect, but critical thinking helps us question and change things. Together, they guide us to solve problems with our people in mind.” (FY3)

Lecturers provided examples of praxis where Ubuntu’s values of care and solidarity are combined with problem-solving and innovation skills promoted by Education 5.0 and critical pedagogy:

“When students work on resolving community challenges, Ubuntu provides the moral foundation to act responsibly, while critical pedagogy fosters a disposition in them to analyze root causes and to innovate solutions.” (LEC3)

This integrated praxis reflects Waghid’s (2014) vision of democratic education and Murwira’s (2019) linking of ethical awareness with innovation. It also resonates with Paul and Elder’s (2014) framework of critical thinking as a tool for emancipatory learning.

Nevertheless, participants critically reflected on the limitations of Ubuntu when deployed without critical engagement, particularly regarding gender and modernity:

“Ubuntu sometimes feels too traditional and doesn’t fully address women’s experiences or modern inequalities.” (FS5)

“We must be careful not to romanticize Ubuntu. Without critical reflection on gender and power, it can exclude voices and maintain injustices.” (LEC1)

These critiques echo Oyěwùmí’s (1997) feminist analysis and Gqola’s concerns about the patriarchal underpinnings sometimes implicit in African communal philosophies. Participants also acknowledged tensions between Ubuntu’s communitarian ethos and contemporary individual rights and gender equity:

“Ubuntu teaches harmony but sometimes clashes with ideas about individual freedoms and women’s rights.” (FY5)

This nuanced engagement of Ubuntu with critical consciousness reflects Mbembe’s (cited in Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) call for African indigenous philosophies to dynamically respond to modern challenges rather than merely preserve tradition.

These findings directly extend insights from the literature explored about the synergy between Ubuntu philosophy, Education 5.0, and critical pedagogy. The lived experiences of students and lecturers exemplify Ramose’s (2002) Ubuntu ethics in practice, while simultaneously echoing Freire’s (2000) and Hooks’ (1994) emancipatory education principles. The reflections on Education 5.0 confirm Murwira’s (2019) framework but also expose implementation gaps noted by Madondo and Mapolisa (2021).

The findings also reveal a rich interplay between Ubuntu, Education 5.0, and critical pedagogy within Zimbabwean teacher education. Ubuntu functions as a powerful philosophy for grounding pedagogical ethics which foster community cohesion, ethics, and relationality, yet it requires critical reflection to avoid essentialism and exclusionist tendencies. Education 5.0 offers a visionary pathway to link heritage, innovation, and industrialisation, but faces practical and epistemological challenges. Critical pedagogy facilitates learners’ awakening to structural injustices and the need for epistemic justice, highlighting persistent power imbalances. The complementarity of Ubuntu and critical consciousness fosters a more holistic and transformative educational praxis, though ongoing critiques underscore the importance of gender sensitivity and responsiveness to modern social realities. Together, these findings illuminate pathways for ethical, contextualised, and revolutionary education in postcolonial Africa.

4.5. Reaffirmation of Ubuntu and Critical Pedagogy as Mutually Enriching Frameworks

This study reaffirms that Ubuntu philosophy and critical pedagogy together form a powerful, complementary foundation for transformative education in postcolonial African contexts. Ubuntu's ethical emphasis on communalism, relationality, and interconnectedness enriches critical pedagogy's focus on conscientisation, social justice, and empowerment. As demonstrated in the findings, Ubuntu nurtures belonging and moral responsibility, while critical pedagogy fosters a disposition in learners and educators to critically interrogate power structures and knowledge hierarchies. This fusion fosters an educational praxis that is both deeply ethical and intellectually liberating, capable of preparing educators to engage with Africa's complex social realities and developmental aspirations.

4.6. Implications for teacher Education curriculum design

4.6.1. Institutionalising Ubuntu in teacher education

The findings highlight the need to move beyond symbolic inclusion of Ubuntu in education toward its full institutionalisation in teacher education. Ubuntu should be embedded as a core pedagogical ethic, explicitly integrated into curriculum content, pedagogical approaches, and experiential learning components. This formalisation will enable teacher education students to internalise and authentically enact Ubuntu values such as empathy, solidarity, and communal responsibility in their professional practice. Embedding Ubuntu also supports culturally responsive teaching, fostering educational environments that validate African identities and nurture social cohesion.

5. CONCLUSION

The convergence of Ubuntu philosophy and critical pedagogy presents a robust pathway for educational reform that aligns with Africa's historical realities and developmental future. Institutionalising these frameworks within teacher education and curriculum design not only addresses structural inequities and epistemic marginalisation but also empowers a new generation of educators and learners committed to social justice, innovation, and communal flourishing. The recommendations provided here offer actionable strategies to actualise this vision, contributing to the emergence of an ethical, relevant, and transformative indigenous education system.

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AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY



Dr Revi Zhakata holds a PhD in Education (Philosophy) obtained from the University of South Africa in January 2025. He is a part-time lecturer at Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University in the Department of Curriculum and Educational Philosophy. His research interests include TechVoc education, philosophical foundations of education, curriculum theory, context-driven pedagogy, decolonialism, heritage and culture, citizenship education, logic, metaphysics, and dialectics.



Davison Zireva attained a Doctor of Education (Philosophy) degree with the University of South Africa (UNISA) in 2015. He has published several articles in philosophy of education and action research. He was a participant of the Archaeology of Ubuntu research project (a Southern African research project). Dr Zireva is a reviewer of journal articles of nineteen journals. Currently he is a lecturer in the department professional foundations at Morgenster College of Education. He is also a part time lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe and the Reformed Church University.

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