




Exploring *Ubuntu* Philosophy as a Foundation for Holistic School Social Work in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper explores the integration of *Ubuntu* philosophy in the school social work practice in South Africa, suggesting a transformative framework to enhance social work practice in a school setting based on the principles of interconnectedness, compassion and community. Drawing from critical social work theories, cultural humility, and restorative justice, the study explores the potential benefits of incorporating *Ubuntu* in addressing the diverse needs of students. Using a narrative literature review methodology, EBSCOhost and Google Scholar search engines were utilised to retrieve scientific literature. The study underscores the importance of cultural competence, community engagement, and restorative practices in shaping interventions. Significantly, the study contributes to a growing body of literature on culturally responsive social work practices, providing insights that can inform transformative approaches to school social work in South Africa and potentially beyond.

KEYWORDS

Ubuntu philosophy; school social work; cultural competence; holistic well-being; South African education.

INTRODUCTION

Unequivocally, South Africa is a country marked by the intricate tapestry of cultures, histories, and languages, and grapples with the enduring complexities stemming from its historical apartheid legacy, particularly within the education fraternity (Murray, 2013). The educational system, serving as a crucible for societal transformation has become instrumental in fostering equity, justice, and inclusivity. Amidst this backdrop, the paper elucidates the pivotal role of school social work services as a linchpin for addressing the multifaceted needs of South African students and communities. A profound exploration is undertaken to investigate how the incorporation of *Ubuntu* philosophy can establish a foundational framework for holistic school social work, not only recognizing the interconnectedness of individuals but also encapsulating the cultural ethos of the country.

South Africa's educational landscape epitomizes a compelling narrative of transformation and resilience, emerging from the shadows of apartheid (Meskell, 2011). Post-apartheid endeavours aimed at democratizing education and dismantling discriminatory policies have made notable strides in creating an inclusive learning environment (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2019). Nevertheless, persistent challenges abound, with disparities in access to quality education perpetuating a complex interplay of social, economic, and cultural factors impacting student well-being, particularly within marginalised communities (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Walker & Mkwanzani, 2015).

Within this challenging context, the significance of school social work services becomes pronounced. As such, South African experts in the field of school social work attest that school social workers extend their responsibilities beyond conventional academic support, and navigate the intricate web of challenges in the school setting encompassing socio-economic disparities (Reyneke, 2020; Vergottini & Weyers, 2020). School social workers emerge as crucial advocates, counsellors, and facilitators, recognizing the need for a multifaceted approach to address the complex needs students bring into the educational milieu (Kolbert et al., 2016).

The paper sets a distinctly useful and essential nexus between the philosophy of *Ubuntu* and the provision of school social work services in South Africa. The general emphasis of *Ubuntu* on connectedness, harmonious existence and commitment to social justice and the proposed essential values resonate strongly with the idea of working towards a more inclusive and equitable education system. Furthermore, I anticipate that unpacking *Ubuntu* as a foundational philosophy for school social work will contribute significantly to the utmost transformation of the education discourse in South Africa.

Progressively, over the last ten years, there has been a significant increase in the number of school social workers in South Africa (Vergottini & Weyers, 2022). However, the current school social work practices in South Africa face major challenges in providing comprehensive support to students. The inequalities arising from social economic disparities along with the historical legacies of apartheid and systemic barriers undermine the equitable provision of services. The piecemeal adoption of intervention strategies leaves a gap between support

systems and the intricate challenges faced by students in schools. The limited cultural responsiveness of school social workers also increases the barriers to students from different backgrounds further perpetuating the cycles of disadvantage.

The rationale underpinning the drive to explore *Ubuntu* as a philosophy that can and should be integrated into current school social work practices is based on the understanding that perhaps current school social work practices are not able to fully inform the nuanced nature of the South African context. *Ubuntu* as an African practice places emphasis on interconnectedness, communal well-being, and social justice (Omodan & Diko, 2021; Van Breda, 2019), and this approach has remarkable parallels to the cultural beliefs that underpin South Africa. The exploration in using *Ubuntu* as a foundational philosophy for school social work then, is to look at how current practices can be informed in ways that are inclusive, and culturally sensitive, and take into consideration the nuanced nature of factors that can be managed to optimise the well-being of students.

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to explore *Ubuntu* philosophy as a foundational framework for school social work, and appropriateness in supporting South African students by critically analysing the pillars of *Ubuntu* which are interconnectedness, compassion and community as it may advocate potential impact on the efficacy of school social work interventions.

The value of the study goes the extra mile in drawing attention to the provision of school social work services in the South African context. The paper explores how the application of *Ubuntu* philosophy in the school social work services will add value and enhance support to the students. The emphasis on the need for a culturally sensitive and holistic approach indicates the pertinence of the study. It is therefore envisaged that effective integration of *Ubuntu* values into school social work services could enhance the intervention and students' well-being in terms of belonging and resilience. It is also hoped that the study will be instrumental in creating a ripple effect and influencing other social arrangements towards an inclusive and supporting educational environment via enhancing community cohesion.

Aim and objectives of the study

The conceptual paper aims to use *Ubuntu* philosophy as a foundation for school social work in South Africa. To achieve this aim, the paper is guided by the following objectives:

- To explore how *Ubuntu* philosophy can be used as a foundation for school social work in South Africa
- To propose pragmatic ways in which school social work practitioners can incorporate *Ubuntu* in the school social work practice

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Integrating *Ubuntu* into school social work is supported theoretically by the incorporation of *Ubuntu* into social work situated broadly within critical and culturally responsive social work theories. *Ubuntu* aligns with critical social work theories that aim at changing existing power

structures and in its reflection of a more collective approach when addressing and hopefully resolving systemic issues. *Ubuntu* also takes a post-colonial and decolonial perspective in critiquing Eurocentric models, which might not be able to attend to the unique South African socio-cultural context (Gwaravanda & Ndofirepi, 2020; Nomngcoyiya et al., 2022).

In addition, *Ubuntu* relates to the cultural humility theory that emphasizes the necessary cultural competence in social work practice (Sewpaul & Kreitzer, 2021). Infusing *Ubuntu* into school social work requires understanding the cultural nuances and interconnections within South African communities. This reflects the core aspects of cultural humility, which involves approaching work with humility, a commitment to learning, and a genuine interest towards the diversity of cultural backgrounds that students and families bring to the table.

METHODOLOGY

I employed a narrative literature review as a methodology to find and analyse the literature. A narrative literature review is an extensive consolidation and integration of existing research on a specific issue, providing an overview of major discoveries and their interconnections using a narrative structure devoid of structured meta-analysis (Ferrari, 2015). According to Reyneke (2020), there appears to be no agreement among scholars on what narrative reviews should comprise. He does agree, however, that narrative reviews are beneficial for educational reasons because they provide a comprehensive viewpoint on a subject. Articles accessed via EBSCOhost and Google Scholar that were no more than ten years old met the inclusion requirements. Non-scholarly articles older than ten years were excluded as part of the exclusion criterion. The keywords included inter alia *Ubuntu* and school social work in South Africa. The limitation of the study was finding articles on school social work and the integration of *Ubuntu* in South African school social work, which made it impossible to conduct a qualitative systematic review.

Understanding the historical context of *Ubuntu*

Ubuntu is a concept that comes from the Nguni Bantu term “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,” a South African philosophy that means, “I am because we are” (Grange, 2015; Moyo & Moyo, 2021; Van Breda, 2019). *Ubuntu* was never written into the South African constitution, but is an idea that comes from the indigenous values of African people, that resonate with the notion that we are in this together. *Ubuntu* is a way of living, of being, that prohibits people from living simply for themselves, without any responsibilities, demands, or emotional attachment to other human beings (Nkambule, 2023). It is important to note that there was *Ubuntu* long even before apartheid was formally instituted. South African people used *Ubuntu* in the years of the anti-apartheid struggle just before the democracy, when *Ubuntu* declared that we are, all of us, whole human beings, all on an equal footing, all occupied in a mutual act of resistance to repression and collective endeavour towards self-reliance and self-improvement, than at any other stage of the history. Interconnectedness, compassion, and community were some of the core pillars of *Ubuntu*:

Interconnectedness

Interconnectedness is the core of *Ubuntu*, as Quan-Baffour et al. (2019:50) stated, “The well-being of individuals is inextricably linked to the well-being of the community”. *Ubuntu* teaches that people are only illusively separated from others. Instead, they are woven into the fabric of the one big community through their ancestors. The individual is not yarn spun separately, but instead another thread connecting everyone to everyone else.

Compassion

It is a belief in *Ubuntu* that compassion, kindness and sympathy are characteristics of a human being and a person with these virtues is not fully grown without them (Mukwedeya, 2022). Compassion in the context of *Ubuntu* is an active force of reaching out and seeking to understand and resonate with the joys, sorrows, struggles, or victories of others. It is what makes a community look after and support each other.

Community

Ubuntu finds its essence in the construct of community that espouses that one’s humanness is inextricably bound to that of his community members (Mupedziswa et al., 2019). This emanates from the principle of shared responsibility besides the ability to help each other out irrespective of the numerous individual dissimilarities. The concept shuns individualism in favour of a community-centred approach to affairs.

Ubuntu’s place in South African cultural traditions

Ewuoso and Hall (2019) assert that *Ubuntu* is deeply rooted in traditional African customs and religion. As such, *Ubuntu* is seen within many African communities’ extended family systems. The bond between family members, the assistance provided in times of any form of celebration or grief, journey for decision-making involved is a true reflection of *Ubuntu* (Nabbumba & Tusasiirwe, 2023). In traditional African customs and religion, many rituals and ceremonies have been conducted to affirm the communal nature of human existence.

The South African languages demonstrate the depths of *Ubuntu* by the sheer number of languages spoken and ideas expressed. One of the languages spoken expresses *Ubuntu* through expressions and proverbs. The South African language proverb or expression “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,” meaning “A person is a person through other people,” is reflected in the language of South Africa. *Ubuntu* is not just a word or an idea but a way of life that is further seen by the diversity and plethora of languages.

Ubuntu in community practices

The relevance of *Ubuntu* in contemporary South African society is also manifested in numerous community practices. Some of these community-based projects are stokvels (*masingcwabane*, *unonceba*, *mogodisano*) to address common challenges (Koenane, 2019). The *Ubuntu* outlook of shared responsibility and mutual support is alive and kicking in these initiatives (Ramagoshi, 2016). Other communal initiatives for infrastructure development, healthcare and education provide further examples of how *Ubuntu* inspires communities to pull together for the common good.

In the festive communal activities of *imigidi* or *imicimbi*, *Ubuntu* is tangible; the spirit of togetherness where family members work side by side sharing tasks in the preparation and serving of meals is the embodiment of the philosophy that we are because of others. It is these rituals that draw people together and generate a sense of belonging and *Ubuntu*, a principle that any individual's well-being is bound up in the well-being of others.

On the other side of the coin, *Ubuntu* serves as a conflict resolution tool in communities (Akinola & Uzodike, 2018). *Ubuntu's* principles of compassion and interconnectedness are reflected in the emphasis on open dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation. Conflict resolution in *Ubuntu* focuses on restoring harmony rather than perpetuating animosity.

Alignment of *Ubuntu* with social justice principles

One of the major components of *Ubuntu* that is aligned with the principles of social justice lies in the heart of the philosophy's very foundation. *Ubuntu* philosophy challenges the prevailing Western paradigm of individualism and instead contends that people are interconnected and that the well-being of each individual is directly tied to the well-being of both their immediate and extended communities (Zwaenepoel, 2019). This particular point speaks to the social justice principle that social workers must recognize and address systemic issues which perpetuate inequality at various levels. *Ubuntu* does not see people as separate or existing outside of the whole but rather stresses our shared humanity, which means that if one member of the community is unjustly oppressed, then the entire community must be committed to the dismantling of the structure, practice or system that has caused harm to the one member or indeed any other persons (Moyo & Moyo, 2021).

Ubuntu upheld another concept of compassion. Compassion will drive social justice in an *Ubuntu* society (Mukwedeya, 2020). *Ubuntu* is showing concern and care for the person next to you. Knowing and understanding what someone is going through will drive *Ubuntu* people to help and make where a person does not feel pain and suffering because the next person understands what the other individual is going through. Compassion does not remain as sympathy, *Ubuntu* people will take action to level the playing field.

Ways in which *Ubuntu* promotes inclusivity and addresses inequality

Ubuntu can be seen to have an effect on issues of inequality under what can be called a common understanding of how society functions. *Ubuntu* probably challenges the assumptions of many in today's society that the economic system, the schooling system anything separated from the political system should presumably just confine people to their separateness and uniqueness and not assist them when they have problems of inequality in all these areas. The philosophy automatically instils a spirit of quiet confidence, belonging and being cared for among its people (Letseka, 2012).

To take *Ubuntu* further is to embrace inclusivity. With this in mind, *Ubuntu* acknowledges that through the recognition of the multiplicity of experiences, perspectives, and identities that individuals bring to the community, *Ubuntu* becomes more welcoming. In doing this *Ubuntu* strives to actively embody *Ubuntu's* crucial characteristic of embracing diversity. *Ubuntu*

inspires inclusivity by ensuring each person's worth and meaningfulness by acknowledging the constant masterpiece (Ngcoya, 2015). Inclusivity is not checked off of the *Ubuntu* list, rather, it is the premise of humanizing individuals.

How interventions and strategies in school social work can be informed by *Ubuntu*

Ubuntu as a guiding philosophy informs specific school social work interventions and strategies for addressing barriers to learning. School social workers use *Ubuntu* as a framework to understand the context. One key strategy informed by *Ubuntu* includes the promotion of community engagement. *Ubuntu*-inspired school social work practice mandates community involvement in decision-making processes as it is believed collective wisdom is always better than isolated wisdom and this involvement promotes ownership and shared responsibility in ensuring student well-being thus interventions are more likely to be effective and contextually relevant.

The concept of restorative justice is another area of interest, which could see substantial gains from the inclusion of *Ubuntu* philosophy within interventions. *Ubuntu* strongly stresses the themes of reconciliation and repairing relationships (Schoeman, 2016). Likewise restorative justice advocates for a framework for dealing with conflicts and disciplinary issues within schools, which seeks reconciliation, understanding, and empathy and prioritizes the restoration of relationships over punitive measures. Thus, restorative justice interventions do not only deal with individual behaviours but also contribute towards the creation of a supportive and unified school community.

School social work interventions, influenced by *Ubuntu* should be inclusive by involving all stakeholders. *Ubuntu* strategies promote the creation of spaces to test out and hear different voices and experience different perspectives. For example, *Ubuntu* principles can be applied to culturally sensitive counselling and support services by recognizing and valuing the cultural background of students. It also requires interventions to be tailored to the needs of the individual student within the broader cultural context.

***Ubuntu*-inspired practices in school social work**

Community circles

The implementation of community circles in schools is an example of a practice that can be inspired by *Ubuntu*. Community circles provide a safe place for community members to engage in dialogue while listening and building empathy. By having community circles in a school, students, teachers, and parents have a place where they can come in and talk about their opinions on a matter or just need to have someone's ear. Social workers are great facilitators for these types of groups. Throughout the meeting, they can encourage people to open up by giving a short testimonial about themselves or the issue at hand and answer any questions that may come up while in the circle.

Peer support networks

Another effect of *Ubuntu*'s communal feeling is the creation of peer support networks in schools. These networks are led by school social workers and allow students to support and

inspire each other. This peer support reflects *Ubuntu's* emphasis on the importance of all people contributing to the welfare of community members.

Events celebrating cultures and raising awareness

Engaging in *Ubuntu* implies that variety is a seed and spirit to growth (Chuwa & Chuwa, 2014). In school social work, *Ubuntu* spirit implies that the school's corrective programmes should include cultural exhibitions and bazaars which shall not only serve to showcase the diverse backgrounds that students come from but also to make them belong to the community of their school. Here, I would affirm that *Ubuntu*-conscious school social work programmes are the power of connection. Elaborating on this point means that school social workers understand that school social work has to look into the whole aspects that make learners slow in classroom input. This means infer in conclusion that *Ubuntu* in school social work calls for an all-rounded school social service to all learners.

Recommendations for school social workers

For school social work practitioners who seek to incorporate *Ubuntu* principles into their practice, the following recommendations may enhance the effectiveness of interventions and promote a culturally responsive approach:

- School social workers must focus on culture by first understanding the students' diverse cultural backgrounds and differences. Know a little history about South Africa and its cultural background. Learn how to understand and engage in cultural competency workshops. And, volunteer in the community for cultural organisations in South Africa. Find cultural leaders and get insights.
- One of the main takeaways from *Ubuntu* is the importance of interconnectedness. To implement this idea, school social workers must actively involve the community in decision-making. Promote open communication between parents, teachers and even local leaders. Through community engagement, interventions can be catered to best fit the interests of the community in turn creating ownership and a sense of responsibility.
- Incorporate and apply conflict resolution strategies that are underpinned by the principles of *Ubuntu* while addressing disciplinary and conflict issues. Place more focus on reconciliation and understanding rather than punitive actions while also creating an environment where relationships are restored and students feel supported in their personal and academic growth.
- The dynamic nature of cultural responsiveness and *Ubuntu* philosophy should be recognised, and ongoing training and professional development should be prioritised for practitioners to ensure development in keeping with emergent insights, challenges and innovative practices. The ongoing training provided to all practitioners should not only cover the theoretical aspects of *Ubuntu* but also provide strategies on how it can be practised practically and within the context of the school.

- Create cross-cultural dialogue opportunities within the school community, which will develop forums to enable students, parents, and educators to share their perspectives and experiences to achieve a sense of unity by breaking down cultural barriers and reinforcing the interconnectedness that is inherent in *ubuntu*.

Policy implications

To enhance the successful integration of *Ubuntu* principles in social work within school settings advocating for a holistic, culture-responsive approach; several policy changes are necessary to align educational policies with the *Ubuntu* philosophy which is interrelatedness, compassion and collectiveness which demands that school social work practice reflect the cultural diversity and need of every South African student.

- Any policy reforms should necessitate the adoption of cultural competence as aggregations and certification requirements for social work employed within a school setting. By that, school social workers will be able to render services by appreciating *Ubuntu* which is a cornerstone in an intercultural South Africa, understanding the cultural diversity. Hence, the rationale for this is embedded in the recognition of developing a culturally competent labour pool that should be able to provide intervention services that conform to the learner's worldview.
- To create a positive and united school community, educational policies need to integrate restorative justice practices. Following this type of policy change will allow for a value-based conflict resolution system, inspired by the African concept of *Ubuntu*, which will put the focus on building a community and reconciliation rather than just punishment. By setting up restorative justice as an institution, schools will reduce the amount of punishment given and instead, focus on building understanding and healing, which ultimately assists in building and maintaining a positive and united school community.
- Mandating ongoing professional development in *Ubuntu* philosophy and culturally responsive practices for school social workers is an essential requirement. Policy needs to specify that practitioners regularly participate in sessions, workshops, or forums that deepen their understanding of *Ubuntu* principles. This will ensure that school social workers remain on the cutting edge of practice and are competent in culturally congruent school social work interventions.
- Policies in school social work should serve to prompt and foster community involvement as part of the regular way of practising school social work. One might establish community advisory boards, have routine town meetings, and provide collaborative decision-making processes with parents, local leaders and students, as examples of policies that would encourage community involvement in policy-making and program development to improve the spirit of *Ubuntu*.
- A major change of policies should be made to the extent that they can aid in the design of curricula to protect cultural responsiveness. Hence, it means that the incorporation of

various cultural perspectives, histories and values such as *Ubuntu* principles should be put in place for the curriculum. In this case, the inclusion of cultural significance in the curriculum can mean that the education policy promotes inclusive learning that relates to *Ubuntu's* concept of interconnectedness and communal well-being.

CONCLUSION

It is held within this conceptual paper that there is a transformative potential of infusing *Ubuntu* Philosophy into the school social work practice, with emphasis on *Ubuntu* Philosophy operating within a paradigm shift, within the realms of holistic connections, connectedness, compassion, and community. It is very clear from the findings in this study that adopting *Ubuntu*-inspired practices can bring about substantial benefits including increased student success and a culture that is inviting and inclusive. This paper shall postulate on critical social work theories, cultural humility and restorative justice as interventions with the emphasis underpinning the need to align intervention within the diverse cultural context in South Africa. Rather than being merely theoretical constructs, the principles of cultural competence, community engagement, and restorative practices have been conceptualised and operationalised as action guides for practitioners to employ in the complex dynamics of school environments. This research profoundly contributes to the topic of culturally responsive social work practices by giving practical illustrations that go beyond being just theoretical. This study proposes to further integrate these principles of *Ubuntu* into school social work recognizing its significant impact on the comprehensive well-being of students as it cultivates a more caring, fair and interconnected educational environment.

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