

Moral Selfhood and *Ubuntu* in Curriculum: Reimagining Adolescent Identity Formation Amid Capitalist Modernity

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Abstract

School curricula shape adolescents' identity and moral selfhood, yet research on indigenising historically colonised curricula remains limited. This paper examines moral identity formation in Zimbabwe's secondary education under Heritage-Based Education using *Ubuntu* as a normative ethical lens. It argues that dominant psychological models and neoliberal schooling prioritise individual achievement in ways that can fragment relational moral development. Using a qualitative and philosophical approach, the study analyses policy documents, classroom observations and interviews with sixteen participants, including teachers, administrators, students, School Development Committee chairpersons and a Curriculum Development official. Findings show a complex tension between exam-driven schooling and *Ubuntu*-centred relational ethics across policy, pedagogy and community expectations. *Ubuntu* foregrounds interconnectedness, mutual care and social responsibility and reorients moral identity toward relational belonging. This study advances scholarship by integrating *Ubuntu* with curriculum inquiry and demonstrating how moral selfhood is co-constructed through institutional structures, classroom practices and community values.

Keywords: *Ubuntu*, Adolescent identity, Moral education, Heritage-Based Education, curriculum inquiry

Introduction

The ambitions that most parents have for their children naturally include the development of important moral dispositions ... to raise children to become persons of a certain kind ... who possess traits that are desirable and praiseworthy, whose personalities are imbued with a strong ethical compass (LAPSLEY & STEY 2008, 30).

The above epigraph usefully highlights the interplay between education curriculum, whether formal or informal, explicit or hidden, and the development of moral and acceptable traits in children. While parents play a critical role in shaping ethical dispositions, schools and their curricula are equally significant. Jang (2022, 632) observes that “the discursive construction of selfhood occurs in schools [...] the school curriculum, society’s official narrative of its collective past and present, provides individuals with a comprehensive framework with which to make sense of themselves”. In this regard curricula do not merely transmit knowledge but actively shape how individuals come to understand themselves as moral beings and what counts as “one’s sense of good”.

In addition, hidden curricula within schools and broader society continue to influence the formation of such dispositions, especially during adolescence. Apple (1976, 211) conceptualises the hidden curriculum as “the tacit teaching to students of norms, values and dispositions that goes on simply by their living in and coping with the institutional expectations and routines of schools day in and day out”. Apple (2023) further notes that such processes are embedded within legitimised worldviews that determine whose knowledge is preserved and distributed within society. This suggests that curriculum is not neutral but operates as a site of power where moral identities are subtly produced and reproduced.

This paper contributes to these debates by examining the role of curriculum in shaping adolescents’ moral selfhood within what is often described as capitalist modernity. Capitalist modernity in this study refers to a socio-economic and cultural order in which market logics, individual achievement and economic value increasingly shape social life and educational priorities. Closely related to this is market-driven schooling, which denotes an orientation of education toward competition, measurable outcomes, employability and performance indicators. Within such contexts, moral selfhood is understood as the way individuals come to see themselves as ethical beings whose identities are formed through relationships, social expectations and value systems.

Within these conditions, adolescence remains a crucial stage for moral identity formation. Scholars argue that young people often navigate competing pressures shaped by neoliberal competition, consumer culture and individual success (HASTE 2018). These pressures can encourage the prioritisation of personal achievement over communal responsibility, which in turn contributes to fragmented moral identities (VERHOEVEN 2021). Bhurekeni (2020) conceptualises this as the neoliberal self, which reflects a socially constructed identity oriented toward self-optimisation and market relevance. However, such an interpretation should not be understood as a complete rejection of Western perspectives but rather as an indication of their limits when applied to contexts where relational and communal values remain central.

In African contexts where community and relationality have historically shaped conceptions of personhood, these tensions are particularly pronounced. African philosophies such as *Ubuntu* emphasise that identity is constituted through relationships with others and foreground values of care, respect and shared responsibility (MBITI 1969). Rather than presenting a simple opposition between

Western individualism and African communitarianism this study understands the relationship as one of tension and intersection where multiple value systems coexist and interact within contemporary schooling. The persistence of Eurocentric educational models in many postcolonial contexts has contributed to a disconnect between school-based knowledge and lived cultural practices (NDLOVU-GATSHENI 2018). This disconnect is further intensified when curriculum structures are shaped by neoliberal priorities that privilege market-oriented outcomes over communal ethical development (APPLE 2023).

Against this background, this paper makes three contributions. First, at a conceptual level, it clarifies the relationship between moral selfhood *Ubuntu* and curriculum by showing how identity formation can be understood within a relational ethical framework. Second, at an empirical level, it draws on qualitative data from Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Education context to demonstrate how these tensions are experienced in practice by different educational stakeholders. Third, at a theoretical level, it advances curriculum inquiry by positioning curriculum as a site of moral identity formation where policy, pedagogy and lived experience intersect.

Importantly, this study does not advocate the wholesale replacement of existing educational systems. Rather, it argues for their reorientation through *Ubuntu*-informed principles that foreground relational ethics community responsibility and culturally grounded understandings of personhood. Through this perspective, curriculum reform becomes not only a technical exercise but also a moral and political project concerned with shaping the kind of persons that education seeks to produce.

The paper is organised into seven sections. After this introduction, the theoretical framework and literature review examine Western psychological models and African communitarian ethics and situate Zimbabwe's curriculum reforms within this debate. The contextual background then outlines the Heritage-Based Education curriculum and its implementation challenges. This is followed by the methodology, which explains the qualitative and philosophical approach employed in the study. The findings present key themes related to moral identity formation, while the discussion explores their broader implications. The final section concludes by summarising the main arguments and offering recommendations for policy and further research.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the African communitarian philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which frames moral selfhood and identity as emerging through social relationships and communal belonging, captured in the adage *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, meaning a person is a person through others (MBITI 1969; RAMOSE 2002). Within this study, *Ubuntu* is used in three interrelated ways as a normative ethical framework that defines what constitutes a good moral life, as an analytical lens for interpreting how moral identities are formed within schooling contexts and as an evaluative criterion for assessing the ethical orientation of curriculum practices.

Conceptually, *Ubuntu* foregrounds a relational ontology in which personhood is not given at birth but realised through participation in communal life. Personhood in this sense refers to the moral status achieved through relationships and socially recognised ethical conduct, while identity denotes the evolving understanding individuals have of themselves within these relationships. Moral selfhood therefore emerges as the integration of these dimensions, reflecting how individuals come to see themselves as responsible members of a community. This contrasts with many Western developmental models such as those advanced by Piaget Erikson and Vygotsky, which, although valuable, often emphasise individual cognitive development autonomy and self realisation as primary drivers of moral growth. The difference is therefore not absolute but lies in emphasis, with Western perspectives foregrounding autonomy and rational judgement while *Ubuntu* highlights relationality interdependence and ethical responsibility.

Within contexts shaped by capitalist modernity and market-driven schooling, these differences become more visible. Educational systems increasingly prioritise competition performance and individual achievement, which can marginalise communal values and weaken ethical cohesion (VERHOEVEN 2021; MLAMBO 2023). From an *Ubuntu* perspective, such orientations risk producing fragmented moral selves whose identities are detached from communal responsibility. However, this study avoids presenting a rigid opposition and instead interprets these dynamics as ongoing tensions and intersections between competing value systems within contemporary schooling.

While *Ubuntu* provides a culturally grounded framework for examining moral identity formation, it is not without critique. Scholars caution against its romanticisation and uncritical application. Wuta (2025) argues that *Ubuntu* is often presented as a unified African philosophy, yet in practice it includes diverse interpretations and meanings across different communities. Similarly, Zhakata and Zireva (2026) explain that there are several debates surrounding *Ubuntu*. They argue that some scholars question whether *Ubuntu* is a clearly defined philosophical system or a broad cultural idea that is interpreted differently by different groups. Others suggest that it is sometimes presented as an ideal moral system that overlooks real social conflicts, power inequalities and ethical dilemmas that exist within African societies. There are also concerns about whether *Ubuntu* can be fully applied in contemporary contexts shaped by globalisation, modern institutions and economic competition where individual success is often prioritised. These debates show that *Ubuntu* should not be treated as a perfect or fixed framework but as an evolving ethical perspective that must be critically examined and carefully applied.

In this study, *Ubuntu* is therefore understood not as a complete replacement for existing theories but as a critical resource that allows for the rethinking of moral selfhood in ways that foreground relational identity while remaining responsive to contemporary realities. Within Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Education curriculum *Ubuntu* is mobilised to integrate culture ethics and communal responsibility into learning processes (MINISTRY OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION 2024; DUBE 2024). By bringing *Ubuntu* into conversation with existing theories of moral development and the realities of

neoliberal schooling, this framework provides a balanced and context-sensitive basis for analysing how adolescents negotiate their moral identities within intersecting individual and communal influences.

Literature Review

The literature on adolescent moral identity formation can be conceptualised under five interrelated themes namely: Western psychological models of identity, African communitarian ethics and *Ubuntu* philosophical reflections on selfhood, Zimbabwean curriculum reforms and moral education and gaps between policy and practice. Rather than treating these debates as isolated, this review integrates them to show how identity, ethics and curriculum interact in shaping moral selfhood within Heritage-Based Education.

Western Psychological Models of Adolescent Identity

Piaget's cognitive development theory Erikson's psychosocial stages and Vygotsky's sociocultural framework have historically informed adolescent identity research (PIAGET 1932; ERIKSON 1968; VYGOTSKY 1978). While these theories remain influential, they are now widely regarded as foundational but insufficient for explaining moral identity in culturally diverse contexts. This limitation has been identified by scholars who argue that stage-based and individual-centred theories tend to universalise moral development while paying limited attention to cultural context, social relationships and communal value systems (MLAMBO 2023). Piaget emphasises stages of reasoning, Erikson focuses on identity formation and Vygotsky highlights social interaction.

Western models such as Kohlberg's (1981) theory of moral development and Pinar's (1975) concept of *currere* continue to shape understandings of moral selfhood, yet they largely prioritise individual reasoning and personal reflection. Recent work challenges this emphasis. Narvaez (2024) demonstrates that moral development is deeply influenced by relational environments, emotional care and community engagement rather than cognitive reasoning alone. This broader ecological perspective highlights how earlier models may overlook the social and cultural conditions that shape moral identity. Kohlberg's focus on justice and rights has been criticised for overlooking relational responsibilities that are central in many African contexts (MLAMBO 2023). Similarly, empirical studies have shown that learners in collectivist societies often prioritise social harmony and shared responsibility over abstract principles of justice, which suggests that moral reasoning cannot be understood outside its cultural context.

African philosophical perspectives provide important alternatives. Menkiti (1984) argues that personhood is achieved through participation in community while Wiredu (2004) calls for ethical thinking rooted in indigenous knowledge. Metz (2012; 2021) develops a relational moral theory grounded in *Ubuntu*. Extending this argument Sefotho and Letseka (2024) show that *Ubuntu* contributes to cognitive justice by recognising indigenous ways of knowing and challenging the dominance of Western psychological frameworks. This indicates that understanding moral identity in African contexts requires attention to relational and culturally embedded forms of knowledge.

African Communitarian Ethics and *Ubuntu*

Ubuntu foregrounds mutual care, social harmony and relational interconnectedness and offers a coherent framework for understanding moral selfhood (MBITI 1969; RAMOSE 2002). It conceptualises identity as emerging through relationships and shared responsibility. Recent scholarship reinforces the relevance of *Ubuntu* in education, particularly within decolonial efforts to transform curriculum. Dube and Moyo (2023) argue that postcolonial curricula must move beyond superficial inclusion of African content and instead centre indigenous epistemologies in meaningful ways that shape both teaching and learning.

However, the integration of *Ubuntu* within formal education remains complex. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2024) explains that African knowledge systems continue to face structural challenges, including epistemic domination by Western paradigms and institutional resistance to alternative forms of knowledge. This means that while *Ubuntu* is often present in policy discourse, its practical implementation is uneven and contested.

Empirical studies show that *Ubuntu* based pedagogies can support collaboration, ethical awareness and social responsibility (VERHOEVEN 2021). Chimbunde and Moreeng (2025) provide a critical analysis of Zimbabwean curriculum reforms and argue that many claims of decolonisation remain symbolic because underlying structures and assessment systems continue to privilege Western models. Ngubane & Makua (2021) demonstrate how *Ubuntu* fosters social cohesion in higher education settings. Unlike these studies, which focus primarily on policy critique or higher education this study examines how moral identity is experienced and constructed by adolescents within secondary schooling. This focus allows for a more grounded understanding of how curriculum reforms influence everyday moral formation.

Curriculum Reform and Moral Education in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's education system reflects historical processes shaped by colonial legacies which privileged Eurocentric knowledge and individual achievement (DUBE 2024). Post-independence reforms aimed to address these imbalances through the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and ethical frameworks.

The introduction of Heritage-Based Education represents a significant attempt to align curriculum with *Ubuntu* principles of relationality and communal responsibility (MINISTRY OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION 2024). From a curriculum theory perspective, this shift reflects an understanding of curriculum as a moral and political text through which values, identities and power relations are negotiated rather than a neutral mechanism for knowledge transmission (APPLE 2023). However, the persistence of examination-driven systems and inherited structures continues to shape how these reforms are implemented in practice.

Gaps Between Policy and Practice

Despite strong policy intentions, there remains a gap between curriculum ideals and classroom realities. Schools continue to prioritise examination competition and measurable outcomes, which often limits space for relational and ethical

learning (MLAMBO 2023). This gap should not be understood as a simple failure of policy but as the result of multiple interacting pressures, including institutional expectations, economic demands and global educational trends.

While *Ubuntu*-based approaches show potential, they are constrained by practical conditions such as limited teacher training, resource shortages and institutional priorities. This study addresses this gap by examining how these tensions are experienced in everyday school settings and how adolescents negotiate their moral identities within these overlapping influences.

Contextual Background

Zimbabwe's education system has historically been shaped by colonial legacies that privileged Eurocentric knowledge and individual achievement (DUBE 2024). Reforms have attempted to address these imbalances by integrating indigenous knowledge and ethical frameworks.

The introduction of Heritage-Based Education represents an effort to align schooling with *Ubuntu* through the promotion of relational identity, community responsibility and ethical development (MINISTRY OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION 2024). However, the implementation of these reforms reveals a more complex reality.

While neoliberal influences such as competition, examination and employability play a significant role in shaping schooling, they do not operate in isolation. They coexist with local initiatives that seek to promote cultural identity, community engagement and ethical education. This coexistence creates a dynamic environment in which different value systems interact and sometimes conflict rather than a situation dominated by a single perspective.

From a curriculum standpoint, this reflects Apple's view that curriculum functions as a political text where competing interests, values and forms of knowledge are negotiated. It also resonates with decolonial perspectives which emphasise the need to challenge inherited systems while creating space for alternative epistemologies and practices (NDLOVU-GATSHENI 2024).

Teachers operate within these complex conditions, often facing large classes, limited resources and insufficient professional development. These constraints affect how *Ubuntu* is taught and understood. For this reason, curriculum reform should be understood as an ongoing and contested process shaped by policy intentions, institutional realities and everyday practices rather than a simple transition from one model to another.

Methodology

The study employs a combined philosophical and qualitative approach framed within curriculum inquiry to explore adolescent moral selfhood in Zimbabwe's secondary education under Heritage-Based Education reforms. Curriculum inquiry treats curriculum as a site where knowledge, values and power intersect, making it central to understanding how moral identities are socially and culturally constructed (PINAR 2012).

The philosophical strand draws on conceptual analysis to clarify key ideas such as *Ubuntu*, moral selfhood and adolescent identity, with particular

attention to how these concepts relate to one another within a relational ethical framework. It also involves a critique of normative frameworks to evaluate how curriculum practices align with African communitarian ethics. This allows the study not only to describe moral identity formation but also to assess the ethical assumptions that underpin curriculum practices. Interpretive reflection is then used to integrate empirical data with philosophical insights, making it possible to show how relational ethics are not only theorised but can also be understood within actual classroom experiences.

The qualitative component draws on phenomenology and narrative inquiry to capture the lived experiences of participants. Phenomenology is used to explore how learners and educators experience moral selfhood in everyday school contexts, while narrative inquiry focuses on how participants construct and make meaning of their identities through their experiences and interactions. By combining these approaches, the study is able to move beyond surface descriptions and uncover how moral identity is both experienced and narrated within schooling.

Participants were purposively selected from the Chitungwiza district. The study involved sixteen participants comprising six teachers, three administrators, School Development Committee chairpersons, three students and one Curriculum Development and Technical Services official. Purposive sampling was adopted to ensure that participants had direct experience with Heritage-Based Education and could provide informed perspectives on curriculum implementation and moral education. The inclusion of diverse stakeholders was necessary to capture multiple viewpoints, including classroom practice, school leadership, community expectations and policy-level insights.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and document analysis of curriculum materials including lesson plans, policy documents and assessment tools. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to reflect on their experiences in depth, while classroom observations provided insight into how curriculum is enacted in practice. Document analysis complemented these methods by revealing how moral education is represented at the policy and instructional levels. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' confidentiality.

Triangulation across interviews, observations and documents enhanced the credibility of the findings by allowing for comparison between reported experiences, observed practices and official curriculum intentions. For example, interview data on competition and collaboration were examined alongside classroom observations to identify consistencies and differences. This demonstrates how the methodological approach directly informs the analysis by linking data sources to key themes such as moral selfhood, relational ethics and curriculum practice.

By integrating philosophical analysis with qualitative data within curriculum inquiry, the study positions the Heritage-Based Education curriculum as a moral and political text reflecting the negotiation of *Ubuntu* values, neoliberal pressures and institutional realities. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of how moral identity is shaped not only by individual experiences but also by broader curriculum structures and societal influences.

Despite these strengths, the study has limitations. The sample size is relatively small and limited to one district, which means that findings cannot be generalised to all Zimbabwean schools. In addition, while the inclusion of multiple stakeholders broadens perspectives, it may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across different regions and school contexts. These limitations are acknowledged in order to situate the findings appropriately and to highlight the need for further research across wider contexts.

Findings

From the analysis of data, three themes were developed namely: Alienated Moral Selves in Competitive Schooling, *Ubuntu* Narratives and Alternative Moral Horizons and Curriculum as a Site of Moral Formation.

Alienated Moral Selves in Competitive Schooling

Participants consistently described the prevailing culture in Zimbabwean secondary schools as highly competitive, driven primarily by national examinations and performance targets. This competitive atmosphere was reported to create feelings of alienation among learners and to undermine the development of a cohesive moral identity grounded in community values.

For example, Teacher 3 observed, *"The pressure to score top marks makes students focus on themselves only. They forget about helping classmates or sharing ideas."*

This suggests that examination-driven practices reinforce individualistic orientations which limit the development of relational moral identities. From a phenomenological perspective, this reflects how learners experience schooling as isolating, which shapes their sense of self in relation to others.

Similarly, Administrator 1 explained, *"School rankings and exam results dominate everything so collaboration takes a backseat."*

This reflects how institutional priorities shape teaching and learning practices by prioritising performance outcomes over ethical engagement. Narratively, this indicates that schooling is constructed as a competitive space rather than a moral community.

An SDC chairperson 2 further noted, *"Parents expect good results and judge schools by pass rates so teachers push learners to compete more than cooperate."* This illustrates how community expectations reinforce examination culture and contribute to the marginalisation of moral education.

Classroom observations provided concrete evidence of these patterns. In four observed lessons across different subjects, learners were required to work individually on exercises drawn from past examination papers. There was no structured group work discussion or collective problem-solving. The observed lessons prioritised correct answers, speed and accuracy rather than ethical reflection or collaborative engagement. This shows how classroom practice reproduces competition and limits opportunities for empathy and shared responsibility.

Document analysis also supported these findings. Analysis of school reports, lesson plans and assessment records showed that evaluation focused almost exclusively on test scores, pass rates and rankings. No formal indicators of

moral development or social responsibility were included in these documents. This indicates that institutional assessment practices align with individual achievement rather than relational values associated with *Ubuntu*.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that curriculum operates as a site where competing value systems intersect. This reflects how the emphasis on performance produces fragmented moral experiences where learners are encouraged to succeed individually while relational moral development remains underemphasised.

***Ubuntu* Narratives and Alternative Moral Horizons**

Despite the dominance of competitive schooling, participants articulated alternative moral perspectives grounded in *Ubuntu*.

Teacher 5 explained, *“Ubuntu teaches us to care for each other. It is about being human together, not just about personal success.”*

This suggests that educators are actively drawing on *Ubuntu* to reframe moral identity in relational terms. From a phenomenological perspective, this reflects attempts to create a sense of belonging within competitive schooling environments.

Similarly, Student 3 reflected, *“When we practice Ubuntu we feel part of a family and support friends when they are struggling.”*

This illustrates how learners experience *Ubuntu* as a lived social practice rather than a theoretical concept. Narratively, this indicates that moral identity is constructed through shared experiences of care, support and interdependence.

An SDC chairperson 3 added, *“At home we teach children respect and cooperation but at school they compete too much.”* This highlights a tension between community-based moral expectations and school-based practices.

The CDTs official explained, *“The curriculum framework promotes Ubuntu, but teachers need more training to apply it effectively in classrooms.”* This suggests that policy intentions exist but practical implementation remains uneven.

Classroom observations provided additional insight. In two observed lessons, teachers organised learners into small groups to discuss community issues such as helping vulnerable members. Learners shared ideas and reflected on responsibilities toward others. These instances were less frequent but showed that *Ubuntu* can be enacted in practice when pedagogical approaches allow for interaction and reflection.

Document analysis further showed that curriculum policy documents emphasise values such as cooperation, respect and social responsibility. However, these values were not consistently linked to assessment practices or daily lesson plans, which limited their influence on learners’ experiences.

These findings demonstrate that *Ubuntu* provides alternative moral possibilities within schooling. At the same time, they show that moral selfhood is not fixed but negotiated as learners’ educators and communities engage with both relational and individualistic value systems.

Curriculum as a Site of Moral Formation

Participants recognised Heritage-Based Education as an important step towards integrating African cultural values and *Ubuntu*. However, evidence shows that the curriculum operates as a contested site shaped by multiple influences.

Textbook analysis revealed clear patterns. Analysis of prescribed English Literature textbooks showed that over eighty per cent of texts were authored by Western writers with limited inclusion of African perspectives. This suggests that curriculum content continues to transmit dominant cultural narratives which shape learners' understanding of identity and moral values.

Language of instruction emerged as another key issue. Teacher 2 explained, *"We want to respect culture through indigenous languages, but since most subjects are taught in English, students end up switching languages a lot. It affects their connection to culture and learning."*

This reflects how the dominance of English limits the internalisation of *Ubuntu*, which is often expressed through indigenous languages. From a phenomenological perspective, this creates a disconnection between cultural identity and learning experience.

Lesson observations and teaching documents further highlighted implementation gaps. Teacher 3 stated, *"We want to teach Ubuntu, but we do not have enough training or resources. The curriculum materials do not always help."*

This suggests that structural constraints such as limited professional development and inadequate resources shape how curriculum goals are realised. Narratively, this indicates that teachers experience tension between policy expectations and classroom realities.

Administrator 3 noted, *"Teachers are assessed mainly on learner performance so they focus on completing the syllabus rather than discussing values."* This reflects how accountability systems influence pedagogical priorities.

Document analysis of curriculum guidelines revealed a significant gap. While policy documents emphasise *Ubuntu* as a cross-cutting value, there is limited guidance on how it should be assessed or integrated into everyday teaching practices. This lack of alignment reduces its practical impact on learners.

Overall, these findings illustrate that Heritage-Based Education functions as a site of negotiation where *Ubuntu* values neoliberal pressures and institutional realities intersect. This illustrates how curriculum reform requires alignment between content pedagogy, assessment and teacher support for moral selfhood grounded in relational ethics to be meaningfully developed.

Discussion of Findings

The discussion is organised around five key themes namely, Normative Implications of *Ubuntu* for Moral Selfhood in Education, *Ubuntu's* Reorientation of Moral Identity and Curriculum Implications, Integrating Intellectual, Emotional and Social Dimensions in Moral Education, Critical Reflection on Heritage-Based Education in relation to Capitalist Neoliberal Pressures and Recommendations for Curriculum Restructuring and Pedagogical Reform.

Normative Implications of *Ubuntu* for Moral Selfhood in Education

The findings of this study highlight *Ubuntu* as a foundational normative framework that reshapes adolescent moral selfhood in Zimbabwean education. Central to *Ubuntu* is the emphasis on relationality, mutual care and community belonging, which contrasts with the individualistic values prevalent in many schooling practices. Mbiti (1969) argues that identity is constituted through relationships, suggesting that moral development should prioritise social cohesion over individual achievement.

Participants across different groups, including teachers, students, administrators, SDC chairpersons and the CDTS official, described schooling environments that foster competition and individual success. SDC chairpersons in particular emphasised how parental expectations reinforce performance-oriented schooling, while the CDTS official highlighted gaps between policy intentions and classroom implementation. This reflects not a complete absence of moral values but a reordering of priorities where measurable achievement tends to dominate. From a phenomenological perspective, learners experience this environment as one that constrains relational engagement, which shapes how they perceive themselves and others.

Integrating *Ubuntu* into educational practices offers a framework for rethinking moral development. Adolescents' moral selfhood, when viewed through this perspective, is not merely internal or private but is enacted through relationships and communal practices. This aligns with Damon and Lerner's (2018) view that moral identity is shaped by social environments. Furthermore, Apple (2004) and Pinar (2012) highlight that curriculum operates as a cultural and political text through which moral orientations are produced. The CDTS official's observations reinforce this by showing how curriculum design may include *Ubuntu* values while assessment practices fail to support them, thereby limiting their impact.

These findings suggest that moral education requires pedagogies that foster empathy, cooperation and shared responsibility. However, rather than presenting this as a replacement of existing practices, the findings point to the need for a balanced integration where relational and individual dimensions of development coexist.

***Ubuntu*'s Reorientation of Moral Identity and Curriculum Implications**

Ubuntu provides a way of reorienting moral identity within the curriculum by emphasising relational belonging and ethical responsibility. The Heritage-Based Education framework reflects this intention (MINISTRY OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION 2024).

Participants, including teachers, administrators, SDC chairpersons and the CDTS official emphasised that *Ubuntu* has the potential to foster empathy, respect and solidarity. SDC chairpersons highlighted that community-level moral expectations often align with *Ubuntu* principles, while the CDTS official pointed out that translating these into formal curriculum structures remains a challenge. Narratively, this indicates that moral education is constructed as a relational process that extends beyond the classroom into community life and policy frameworks.

From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with Pinar's concept of selfhood as narrative and Apple's understanding of curriculum as a political text. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that curriculum reform must address both content and structure.

However, the findings show uneven implementation. Teachers reported limited training, SDC chairpersons noted the pressure from communities for high academic performance, and policy documents revealed weak alignment between *Ubuntu* values and assessment practices. The CDTs official further emphasised that teachers require clearer guidance on how to assess relational values within existing educational frameworks. This illustrates that curriculum functions as a site of negotiation rather than a fully coherent system.

Addressing these gaps requires integrated strategies including teacher development, culturally responsive resources and alignment of assessment practices with relational values. This reinforces Pinar's argument that curriculum is lived experience and must be enacted through practice.

Critical Reflection on Heritage-Based Education in relation to Capitalist Neoliberal Pressures

The study found that schooling operates within a broader context shaped by neoliberal pressures such as competition, employability and performance measurement. Participants across all stakeholder groups, including SDC chairpersons and the CDTs official described how these pressures influence both teaching and learning.

SDC chairpersons specifically highlighted how parental expectations for employment outcomes reinforce exam-oriented schooling, while the CDTs official acknowledged that policy frameworks must balance global competitiveness with local ethical values. These findings reveal a complex coexistence of value systems rather than a simple opposition between *Ubuntu* and neoliberalism.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argues that neoliberal frameworks can fragment moral identities by prioritising economic outcomes. Verhoeven (2021) similarly notes that competitive environments contribute to moral tension. The present findings extend these arguments by showing that stakeholders actively negotiate these tensions rather than simply reproducing them.

Apple's notion of curriculum as a political text explains how institutional structures embed dominant values, while Pinar's concept of lived experience highlights everyday negotiation. By synthesising these perspectives, the study shows that moral selfhood emerges through dynamic interaction between policy structures, classroom practices and lived experiences.

These insights suggest that meaningful reform requires systemic alignment. Without such alignment, *Ubuntu* remains present in policy discourse but limited in practice.

Critical Tensions and Limitations of *Ubuntu*-Based Moral Education

While *Ubuntu* offers a valuable framework for moral education, its implementation faces several challenges. Teachers reported limited training and resources, while the CDTs official highlighted gaps in policy guidance, particularly in relation to assessment.

SDC chairpersons emphasised that communities often prioritise academic success and employment opportunities, which places pressure on schools to focus on examination performance. This demonstrates how broader socio-economic expectations shape educational priorities and complicate the implementation of relational moral frameworks.

There is also a risk of presenting *Ubuntu* as a uniform and ideal system, which may overlook differences in interpretation and lived experience across communities. This reinforces the need to approach *Ubuntu* as dynamic and context-sensitive.

These tensions indicate that *Ubuntu* should not be treated as a replacement for existing frameworks but as a critical resource that supports more balanced and context-aware approaches to moral education.

Recommendations

Addressing the identified challenges requires targeted curriculum restructuring and pedagogical reform grounded in the lived experiences of all stakeholders involved in this study.

First, teacher training must be strengthened through mandatory in-service professional development programmes on *Ubuntu* pedagogy informed by teachers' reported lack of training and the CDTS official's emphasis on implementation gaps. These programmes should include practical strategies such as collaborative learning and ethical dialogue to address the classroom-level challenges identified by teachers.

Second, educational resources require revision. This recommendation arises from textbook analysis and teachers' observations that curriculum materials remain Eurocentric. The Ministry, together with CDTS, should ensure greater inclusion of African content and provide locally relevant teaching materials that reflect relational ethical values.

Third, language policy must be strengthened. This responds directly to teachers' and students' experiences of cultural disconnection and the observed dominance of English in classroom practice. Expanding the use of indigenous languages will enhance the internalisation of *Ubuntu* values.

Fourth, assessment structures must be realigned. Administrators and teachers highlighted that assessment systems prioritise examination results while ignoring moral development. Therefore, assessment should include indicators such as cooperation and community responsibility supported by project-based and reflective evaluation methods.

Fifth, broader systemic reform is required. SDC chairpersons emphasised that parental and community expectations prioritise academic performance while the CDTS official highlighted tensions between policy and practice. Policymakers should therefore develop mechanisms that align community expectations, policy goals and school practices through structured engagement platforms and monitoring systems.

These recommendations demonstrate that meaningful reform must respond to classroom realities, community expectations and policy constraints, simultaneously ensuring that *Ubuntu* is enacted across all levels of the education system.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined adolescent moral selfhood within Zimbabwe's secondary education system under Heritage-Based Education reforms using *Ubuntu* as a normative lens. Three central conclusions emerge. First, findings from teachers' students and classroom observations show that examination-driven schooling produces fragmented moral identities by prioritising individual achievement over relational responsibility. Second, insights from students' teachers and SDC chairpersons demonstrate that *Ubuntu* continues to provide a lived moral framework that supports belonging, cooperation and ethical responsibility within communities. Third, evidence from administrators and the CDTs official reveals that structural constraints, including assessment systems, policy implementation gaps and limited teacher preparedness, hinder the full enactment of *Ubuntu*-based moral education. From a theoretical perspective, the study shows that moral selfhood is shaped through the interaction of curriculum structures, lived experiences and community values. *Ubuntu* provides a relational framework that addresses the limitations of individualistic models while remaining adaptable to contemporary contexts. The study also has limitations. The research was conducted in one district with a small but diverse sample, which limits generalisation across Zimbabwe. Although multiple stakeholders were included, the study cannot fully capture regional variations in curriculum implementation.

Globally, this study contributes to debates on culturally responsive education by showing how relational ethical frameworks can inform curriculum development in contexts shaped by competing local and global pressures. In conclusion, moral selfhood among adolescents emerges not from a single framework but from the interaction of school practices, community expectations and policy structures. By drawing on the experiences of all stakeholders, this study demonstrates that *Ubuntu* informed education provides a contextually grounded approach that can support more integrated and socially responsive forms of moral development.

Declaration: The authors declare no conflict of interest or ethical issues for this work.

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