

***Ubuntu* as a Philosophical Framework for Discipline, Inclusion, and Social Justice in South African Education**

Baken Johannes Lefa

Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa

Email: bjlefa@gmail.com

Submitted: 30 March 2025 Accepted: 3 September 2025 Published: 22 June 2026



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0

Abstract:

Ubuntu lies at the heart of African philosophy and continues to shape moral consciousness and communal relations across South African society. As a humanistic ethic rooted in compassion, dignity, and reciprocity, *Ubuntu* holds transformative potential for education systems facing moral and disciplinary challenges. This paper investigates how *Ubuntu* functions as an ethical framework within South African schools, particularly in cultivating discipline, inclusive school culture, and social justice. The study adopts a conceptual and literature-based analysis approach, drawing on key philosophical texts, national education policies (CAPS, NCS, White Paper 6), and scholarly works by Letseka, Msila, and Broodryk. By critically examining the role of *Ubuntu* values—such as empathy, respect, collective responsibility, and forgiveness—this paper explores how these values manifest or fail to manifest in school environments. Findings indicate that schools that embrace *Ubuntu* tend to foster stronger discipline, respectful relationships among staff and learners, and increased academic motivation. Conversely, the absence of *Ubuntu* correlates with indiscipline, alienation, and unsafe school climates. The analysis also highlights the integration of *Ubuntu* within curriculum documents and its alignment with the goals of social justice and inclusive education. This paper contributes to African educational thought by positioning *Ubuntu* not merely as a cultural ideal, but as a practical and philosophical foundation for ethical school leadership, social cohesion, and transformative pedagogy.

Keywords:

Ubuntu; school discipline; social justice; inclusive education; South African philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

Ubuntu is defined by Letseka (2011) as a form of human engagement that allows for critical thinking, non-domination and the optimal development of human relationships. *Ubuntu* means that each individual's humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others, *Ubuntu* is then to be aware of one's own being but also of one's duties towards one's neighbour. According to Mbigi (1997), "*Ubuntu* is a concrete manifestation of the interconnectedness of human beings; it is the embodiment of South African culture and lifestyle".

In schools we say the school outcomes are influenced by *Ubuntu* personality values such as caring, forgiveness, sharing, equality, sympathy, empathy, compassion, respect, tolerance, humanness, and harmony for others. Mbigi (1997) states that where pupils have more of the above qualities there is greater desire to learn, every school has its own unique culture. According Mbigi (1997), the school culture gives the school its unique identity. Culture represents the schools way of life and the way things are done. Mbigi (1997) many studies have revealed a link between school culture and its effectiveness, school development, academic achievement and learner discipline.

Over the past two decades, a growing body of research has examined the significance of *Ubuntu* as a foundational philosophy in African education. Scholars have emphasized *Ubuntu's* potential to foster inclusive and ethical learning environments rooted in respect, empathy, and collective well-being. For instance, Waghid (2014, p. 23) asserts that *Ubuntu* nurtures dialogical engagement and democratic deliberation in classrooms, thereby encouraging critical pedagogy and humanization of learners. Similarly, Metz (2011, p. 533) argues that *Ubuntu* offers a normative framework for moral education by emphasizing communal harmony over individualism. Broodryk (2006, p. 5) presents *Ubuntu* as a transformative value system that can address challenges in learner behavior and promote a more respectful school culture.

Further, Makgoba (1999, p. 198) contends that the integration of *Ubuntu* principles into school leadership results in more cohesive and culturally relevant management practices. Moreover, Swanson (2007, p. 56) highlights the application of *Ubuntu* in teacher-student relationships, noting that its practice enhances mutual respect, reduces conflict, and cultivates a sense of belonging. These studies collectively suggest that *Ubuntu* is not merely a cultural artifact but a viable educational philosophy that supports moral development, discipline, and inclusive education in the South African context.

According to Letseka (2011), the school culture influences how people do things in the school. The issue of discipline in schools or in education is selected as a way to demonstrate the concept of *Ubuntu* mostly amongst learners and teachers or either all the bodies in the school environment. Letseka (2011) *Ubuntu* is actually regarded as the soul force that drives almost every facet of societal life in African societies and creates the relationship between the African communities. *Ubuntu* in society emphasize the principles such as, respect for people through cooperative human activity and

recognition of human vulnerabilities, seeks individual and communal good to enhance the prosperity of others, the self and the community and a” person is a person through other persons.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative conceptual analysis approach, focusing on *Ubuntu* as a philosophical and ethical framework within the context of South African education. Rather than using empirical fieldwork or statistical data, the research engages with primary and secondary literature, including academic journal articles, educational policy documents (such as the National Curriculum Statement and White Paper 6), and foundational texts in African philosophy. The method involves thematic interpretation, where key values associated with *Ubuntu*—such as compassion, communalism, respect, and human dignity—are traced across educational discourses to assess how they shape understandings of school discipline and inclusivity (Higgs & Smith, 2015, p. 42; Le Grange, 2012, p. 57). By analyzing textual content, the study identifies normative themes and ideological underpinnings that position *Ubuntu* as a moral compass in school environments (Hoadley, 2010, p. 17).

The research integrates document analysis as a secondary method, particularly reviewing how *Ubuntu* principles are embedded in the official educational frameworks. This includes a critical reading of South African education policies and curriculum guidelines where *Ubuntu* is implicitly or explicitly referenced as a guiding value (Jansen, 2009, p. 89). Through discourse analysis, the paper evaluates how *Ubuntu* is operationalized in school leadership, learner discipline, and classroom relationships. The use of philosophical hermeneutics allows for a deep interpretation of meaning, especially in identifying how *Ubuntu* contributes to ethical education and the broader aims of social justice in schooling (Waghid & Davids, 2019, p. 66).

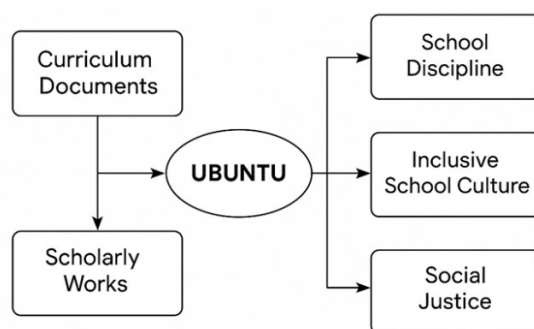


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

UBUNTU IN SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION

Ubuntu in education typically begins with school leadership—principals and teachers—since many successful or high-performing schools are those that actively embrace *Ubuntu*-based leadership. For example, schools that treat all learners equally and consistently practice *Ubuntu* values tend to reflect these principles in their culture. According to Letseka (2011), the presence of *Ubuntu* in a school can be observed through the daily practices and interactions within the school community, as these reflect the core values of *Ubuntu* itself. Letseka further explains that the philosophy of *Ubuntu* in South African education is demonstrated through school discipline, which ensures the safety of both staff and learners, while also creating an environment conducive to teaching and learning.

Sustainable development in education, according to Letseka (2011), depends on harnessing the collective energy of the school community—teachers, staff, learners, and the surrounding society—through collaborative engagement. Teaching, learning, and professional development across disciplines should be grounded in the principles of *Ubuntu*, which views leadership as a collective and inclusive process. This entails the formation of strong partnerships between schools and communities, including parents, learners, educators, school leaders, and government stakeholders, all of whom actively participate in shaping and implementing educational programmes.

For instance, teachers and staff should first demonstrate self-respect and self-care, which they then extend to all learners, regardless of their background or circumstances (Letseka, 2011). The integration of *Ubuntu* in school discipline has profound implications: high-performing schools are often characterized by the active presence of *Ubuntu* values. Generally, the level of discipline reflects the degree to which *Ubuntu* is embraced within the school and its surrounding community. Msila (2008) notes that when schools adopt *Ubuntu*, the student body tends to be more disciplined. Consequently, effective school leadership and improved academic performance are closely tied to the presence—or absence—of *Ubuntu*. Conversely, a lack of *Ubuntu* is typically associated with poor discipline, diminished respect, and the erosion of social cohesion within the school environment.

***Ubuntu* in Education**

Letseka (2011) argues that *Ubuntu* in education is considered a form of African

cultural capital that provides indigenous knowledge essential for advancing the African conception of inclusion. This conception, in turn, promotes inclusivity, equality, and social justice within the educational system. According to Letseka, the purpose of education is to liberate the minds of the oppressed, dismantle social hierarchies, and cultivate a unified human consciousness in society. Education, therefore, should foster imagination, critical deliberation, and responsibility—actions that support the pursuit of justice in educational relationships, particularly within the African context. *Ubuntu*-based education encourages learners to recognize the humanity within themselves and others.

Schools, then, should promote cooperative learning environments where students engage in mutual sharing and collaboration. *Ubuntu*, when applied to schools, represents an inclusive approach that calls for dignity and respect in all educational relationships—whether among learners, teachers, or the broader school community. Broodryk (2006, p. 32) notes that communities embracing *Ubuntu* tend to value humanism, fairness, and compassion. In such communities, learners and school staff form a collective bound by shared human values, thus fostering a school culture rooted in *Ubuntu*.

According to Broodryk (2006, p. 32), *Ubuntu* and human dignity manifest through practices of compassion, kindness, and respect—qualities central to establishing a school as a place of learning and growth, rather than conflict and alienation. He further emphasizes that the values promoted within schools reflect those of society, as schools serve to transmit the ethical norms and belief systems held by their communities. These values, in turn, guide how society evaluates its own moral worth through the education of its members.

The core values of *Ubuntu*, as articulated by Broodryk (2006, p. 32), provide a reference point from which both teachers and learners engage in meaningful assessment and interaction. Letseka (2011) reinforces this by stating that the entire education process in South Africa revolves around *Ubuntu* as a philosophical and ethical system, in which individuals accept responsibility for others and respect authority in order to contribute to collective progress. Ultimately, *Ubuntu* in education grants learners a sense of humanness and encourages a holistic understanding of their own development, rather than reducing their abilities to mere academic outcomes. As emphasized by the Government Gazette (No. 20844), teachers in schools that embody

Ubuntu must be competent, compassionate, and committed to providing equitable and respectful education to all learners, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Ubuntu Understood Directly by Literature

Many scholars understand *Ubuntu* as a set of actions that directly symbolize the essence of humanness in human interactions. *Ubuntu* encompasses essential human virtues such as compassion, empathy, and humanity. It is viewed as the manner in which individuals treat others—with care, dignity, and mutual respect. As Broodryk (2006, p. 4) states, the “*Ubuntu* personality” refers to the ideal human being who embodies ancient *Ubuntu* values. A person living according to *Ubuntu* principles is expected to demonstrate kindness, generosity, harmony, friendliness, modesty, helpfulness, humility, and joyfulness toward others. Crucially, *Ubuntu* emphasizes treating all individuals equally, regardless of their background, status, or circumstances.

Ubuntu can also be directly linked to the values and principles of **social justice**. In a broad sense, social justice refers to the pursuit of equality, fairness, and equity, especially toward groups or individuals who have historically been marginalized or excluded—economically, politically, or socially—based on characteristics such as race, class, gender, language, religion, age, ability, or sexual orientation. These principles align closely with the ethical foundations of *Ubuntu*. In this regard, *Ubuntu* and social justice function as parallel, mutually reinforcing processes: wherever *Ubuntu* is genuinely embraced, social justice naturally follows.

Broodryk (2006, p. 4) further explains that one of the central goals of social justice is social equality, which means full inclusion and equal participation in key institutions such as schools, churches, and workplaces, with equal opportunity for all to develop their potential and realize their goals. For example, when a school has learners from various religious, social, or ethnic backgrounds, and ensures they are treated equally and offered the same opportunities, it is a clear demonstration of *Ubuntu* in practice.

The phrase “*No Future Without Forgiveness*” as expressed by South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission exemplifies the core values of *Ubuntu*. Forgiveness is a cornerstone of *Ubuntu*, especially in educational leadership and school discipline. Without it, schools are more likely to experience conflict and breakdowns in relational harmony.

According to Broodryk (2006, p. 4), *Ubuntu* fosters relationships that break down

barriers in diverse school settings, which is a fundamental goal of social justice education. He also asserts that *Ubuntu* provides opportunities for people to engage with one another meaningfully within diverse communities. These aspects of *Ubuntu* are supported by educational policy documents such as White Paper 6 and the Government Gazette, which implicitly recognize *Ubuntu* as foundational to inclusive, respectful, and human-centered education. As Broodryk (2006, p. 4) concludes, humanism in education—defined as the prioritization of human needs, interests, and dignity—is deeply aligned with *Ubuntu* philosophy.

***Ubuntu* Understood Indirectly by Literature**

Several educational documents and policy frameworks understand *Ubuntu* indirectly, embedding its principles within broader commitments to ethics, inclusion, and democratic practice. For example, the *Government Gazette* (No. 20884) outlines that educators are expected to promote a critical, committed, and ethical attitude toward developing mutual respect and a sense of responsibility toward others. Educators are also expected to uphold the Constitution and foster democratic values and practices in schools and society. Within the school context, they should demonstrate the ability to create a supportive and empowering environment for learners, while also addressing the educational and personal needs of both learners and colleagues.

Similarly, *Government Gazette* No. 20844 emphasizes that teachers operating within an *Ubuntu*-informed framework should be competent, compassionate, and committed to providing equitable and respectful education to all learners, regardless of their socio-economic background or personal circumstances.

Curriculum documents such as the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) indirectly incorporate *Ubuntu* through their stated aims, principles, and outcomes. The concept is also reflected in national values enshrined in the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (Act 108 of 1996), which emphasizes human dignity, equality, and the advancement of human rights and freedoms. These constitutional values encourage citizens to contribute to the building of a humane, caring, and inclusive society—an ethos closely aligned with *Ubuntu*.

In particular, White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education recognizes the fundamental belief that all children and youth can learn, and that their diverse learning needs should

be accommodated and respected equally. This reflects *Ubuntu's* call for embracing difference and promoting collective humanity. The *Department of Education's* White Paper 6 (2011) explicitly states that teachers should acknowledge and respect learner differences—whether in age, gender, ethnicity, language, class, disability, or HIV status. Although *Ubuntu* is not always named directly, the values embedded in these policies—such as inclusion, compassion, equality, and respect—clearly mirror *Ubuntu* philosophy. In this way, *Ubuntu* is indirectly promoted as a foundational moral compass within South African education policy.

***Ubuntu* and Curriculum Policy Documents**

The *Department of Education* (DoE, 2002), through the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), outlines general aims and principles that reflect the values of *Ubuntu*. These curriculum frameworks position education as a process deeply rooted in ethical principles that capture the belief system of South African society—one in which individuals take responsibility for others and accept communal guidance in pursuit of collective progress. These documents not only acknowledge *Ubuntu* in theory but also integrate its values into practical educational aims and outcomes.

Both NCS and CAPS emphasize the importance of equipping learners with knowledge, skills, and values that are meaningful and applicable to real-life contexts. Central to these principles are *Ubuntu*-aligned values such as human dignity, respect, empathy, equity, and community responsibility. For instance, the documents advocate for social transformation, aimed at redressing historical educational imbalances and ensuring equal access to quality education for all learners (DoE, 2002). This goal is closely aligned with the social justice objective of equality, a foundational value of *Ubuntu*.

Furthermore, the second purpose of the NCS promotes active and critical learning, encouraging learners to engage constructively with their world—another principle resonant with *Ubuntu's* emphasis on participatory, reflective, and human-centered education. Values explicitly stated in the curriculum, such as equality, kindness, inclusivity, environmental and social justice, and human rights, are either direct expressions of *Ubuntu* or closely tied to its moral vision.

Inclusivity, as emphasized in White Paper 6, reinforces *Ubuntu's* core ideal of

humanness by acknowledging and embracing diversity among learners. The curriculum affirms that all students—regardless of socio-economic background, race, gender, physical ability, or intellectual capacity—should be equipped with the necessary knowledge and values to achieve self-fulfillment and to participate meaningfully in society (DoE, 2002).

***Ubuntu* Manifest Itself in Education**

According to Msila (2008), school outcomes are significantly influenced by the *Ubuntu* personality values embraced within the school environment. In contexts where learners embody *Ubuntu*-related qualities—such as empathy, respect, and cooperation—there is often a greater desire and motivation to learn. *Ubuntu* manifests in schools when teachers and leaders genuinely listen to learners' stories, encourage critical thinking, and foster self-reflection. When *Ubuntu* is present, educators and education departments actively engage with transformative ideas to improve the education system as a whole.

Msila (2008) further explains that discipline and unity within schools are underpinned by *Ubuntu*. Learners' behavior—whether respectful or disrespectful toward peers and adults—becomes a reflection of whether *Ubuntu* is being practiced. *Ubuntu* becomes evident in moments of crisis, such as bullying or truancy, when collective efforts involving teachers, parents, and senior management teams (SMTs) are mobilized to address disciplinary challenges. Such teamwork reflects *Ubuntu* in action; without it, effective collaboration and school improvement are unlikely.

Where *Ubuntu* is practiced, discipline is generally stronger and more effective. This involves maintaining order through the fair, consistent enforcement of clear rules that are understood by all. In such schools, staff members respect themselves, one another, and the humanity of their learners. Msila (2008) emphasizes that the positive effects of *Ubuntu* are especially visible in school discipline: well-disciplined, high-performing schools tend to demonstrate a strong presence of *Ubuntu* principles. The level of discipline within a school, therefore, serves as an indicator of the presence—or absence—of *Ubuntu* in that community.

Moreover, schools that embrace *Ubuntu* often exhibit mutual respect between teachers and learners, and promote inclusive environments with diverse student populations. Msila (2008) notes that the type of leadership associated with improved

school performance is closely linked to *Ubuntu*-based values. School leadership grounded in *Ubuntu* is characterized by its respect for community partnerships, fostering a shared vision between the school and its broader social context.

***Ubuntu* not Manifesting Itself in Education**

An ill-disciplined learner reflects a failure to embrace the principles of *Ubuntu*. According to Msila (2008), the absence of *Ubuntu* within a school setting often leads to undesirable outcomes, including the breakdown of respect, trust, and order. Without *Ubuntu* values, schools lack the foundation for effective and efficient teaching and learning. In such environments, there is a notable erosion of mutual respect among learners, teachers, and parents, which in turn inhibits collaboration and positive relationships.

A school that does not practice *Ubuntu* will likely experience high levels of indiscipline, both from learners and staff. Learners' behavior toward their peers and adults will fail to reflect human dignity, undermining the core values that education seeks to instill. Acts of disrespect, conflict, and defiance ultimately compromise the aims and purposes of education. As Msila (2008) observes, no meaningful learning can take place in a chaotic environment.

In extreme cases, the absence of *Ubuntu* has been associated with serious incidents such as violence and even murder within school premises—indicating that schools without *Ubuntu* have become unsafe and un conducive to teaching and learning. Msila (2008) describes this shift as a transition from *Ubuntu* to “thingification,” where individuals no longer treat one another as human beings, but rather as objects devoid of value and dignity. In such contexts, crime, hooliganism, and general disorder become prevalent, revealing the critical importance of *Ubuntu* in creating a peaceful, respectful, and morally grounded school culture.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *UBUNTU* AND THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

Young (1990) states that in the schools or society that embraces *Ubuntu* the values of social justices such as the promotion of values of diversity amongst race, gender and social class, the improvement of relationships between learners, breaking down barriers in diverse school settings and addressing stereotypes with regard to race,

gender, ability, language, accent are always present. *Ubuntu* is a weapon used by schools or society to challenge the inequality and injustices. In order to fully realise the spirit of *Ubuntu* in education, According to Young (1990), it is good to engage members of our communities. This is the first step towards achieving the values of being the caring nation, with recognised democratic values and a social justice system that is based on equality, non-racism, non-sexism and human dignity in education. *Ubuntu* means that a person is a person through other people and *Ubuntu* societies develop mechanism to maintain social cohesion and harmony then we say *Ubuntu* lead to the achievement of social justice in education, for example; the teacher in the school that practice *Ubuntu* respect and value and include all the learners' needs. *Ubuntu* is linked with the social justice through humanness. *Ubuntu* in society is actually recognised by what is morally good for individuals and community is determined by the dignity, respect and contentment to enhance the prosperity of others which are also the goals for social justice. According to Young (1990), the school that practice social justice goals give respect to religion, ethnic and culture of learners and teachers encourage equal learner participation.

The goals of *Ubuntu* are similar to social justice goals, social justice goals emphasize equality among all learners the goal is linking with *Ubuntu* value of equality. Young (1990) states that the teacher advocate social justice in education through social justice and *Ubuntu* values inclusivity and human rights. Teacher addresses the forms of social justice in class through practice to address and deal with discrimination. For the school to practice social justice values such as respect, inclusion they are first influenced by *Ubuntu* values. According to Young (1990) The goals of social justice such as promotion of values of diversity amongst race gender and class; the improvement of relationships between learners; and Breaking down barriers in diverse school settings are all supporting the values of *Ubuntu*. The main goal of social justice is social equality which means the full participation and inclusion of everyone in a society's schools.

CONCLUSION

Ubuntu is a principle centered on caring for the well-being of others and fostering a spirit of mutual support. Each individual's humanity is best expressed through their relationships with others, and in turn, through the recognition of others' humanity. As Msila (2008) explains, "a person is a person through other people." *Ubuntu*

acknowledges both the rights and responsibilities of every citizen in promoting personal and collective well-being. It represents not only a philosophy but also a way of living that enables our inherent goodness to emerge. True *Ubuntu* recognizes and respects differences and constantly seeks consensus, rather than enforcing uniformity. In the context of education, school leadership plays a vital role in creating an environment that is conducive to both teaching and learning.

Ubuntu values can significantly enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of education. According to Msila (2008), five key social values—survival, solidarity, compassion, respect, and dignity—form what is referred to as the Collective Finger Theory, which underpins the *Ubuntu* philosophy. These values highlight the importance of individual contributions to the collective good. Ultimately, schools that fully embrace *Ubuntu*—from leadership to learners and parents—are more likely to foster environments grounded in respect, unity, and academic success.

REFERENCES

- Broodryk, J. (2006). *Ubuntu African life coping skills: Theory and practice*. Ubuntu School of Philosophy.
- Department of Education. (2002). *National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9 (Schools)*. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- Department of Education. (2011). *Education White Paper 6: Special needs education: Building an inclusive education and training system*. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- Higgs, P., & Smith, J. (2015). *Philosophy of education today: An introduction*. Juta.
- Hoadley, U. (2010). What do we know about teaching and learning in South African primary schools? *Education and Development in South Africa*, 1(1), 16–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16823206.2012.745725>.
- Jansen, J. D. (2009). *Knowledge in the blood: Confronting race and the apartheid past*. Stanford University Press.
- Le Grange, L. (2012). *Ubuntu, ukama, environment and moral education*. *Journal of Moral Education*, 41(3), 329–340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2012.691631>.
- Letseka, M. (2011). Educating for *Ubuntu*. *Open Journal of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <http://www.scirp.org/journal/PaperDownload.aspx?paperID=32164>.

- Makgoba, M. W. (1999). *African Renaissance: The new struggle*. Mafube Publishing.
- Mbigi, L. (1997). *Ubuntu: The African dream in management*. Knowledge Resources.
- Metz, T. (2011). *Ubuntu as a moral theory and human rights in South Africa*. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 11(2), 532–559. <https://www.ahrlj.up.ac.za/metz-t>.
- Msila, V. (2008). *Ubuntu and school leadership*. *Journal of Education*, 44, 67–84. https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1996-20962011000200011.
- Swanson, D. M. (2007). *Ubuntu: An African contribution to (re)search for/with a 'humble togetherness'*. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, 2(2), 53–67. <https://doi.org/10.20355/C5PP4X>.
- Waghid, Y. (2014). *Pedagogy out of bounds: Untamed variations of democratic education*. Sense Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-616-5>.
- Waghid, Y., & Davids, N. (2019). *Educational theory and practice in twenty-first century South Africa: Ten years of democracy*. African Sun Media.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton University Press.
- Yusef, W. (2014). *African philosophy of education reconsidered: On being human*. Routledge.