

Heritage-Based Education as a Catalyst for Integrating Ubuntu Philosophy in Primary Classrooms

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Keywords: • Heritage-Based Education • Ubuntu Philosophy • Teacher Agency • Indigenous Knowledge Systems • Culturally Responsive Pedagogy • Curriculum Implementation

Abstract

This study explores how Heritage-Based Education serves as a catalyst for integrating Ubuntu philosophy into primary school classrooms, focusing on teachers' interpretations, classroom implementation, and the promotion of cultural and ethical values. It highlights the role of Indigenous knowledge systems and communal ethics in foundational education, contributing to debates on culturally responsive curricula. Using a qualitative ethnographic case study design, data were generated through semi-structured interviews with two community leaders, five teachers and two administrators, classroom observations conducted by the researchers, and analysis of curriculum guides and teaching materials at a school in Seke Rural, Mashonaland East Province. Data were analysed thematically. Findings show that Heritage-Based Education actively enabled and strengthened the enactment of Ubuntu values such as respect, cooperation, and communal responsibility. Teachers employed strategies including storytelling, mother-tongue instruction, and structured collaboration with community elders, positioning heritage education as a practical driver of ethical and relational learning. Despite challenges such as limited training, scarce resources, and assessment misalignment, teachers creatively adapted lessons to achieve cultural, ethical, and pedagogical goals. The study recommends targeted teacher professional development, improved provision of culturally relevant learning materials, and assessment reforms that recognise ethical and cultural learning outcomes, to strengthen effective curriculum implementation and sustain Ubuntu-informed pedagogy.

Indigenization Statement

Revi Zhakata and Joseph Dzavo are Shona men from Zimbabwe who co-authored this study. Zhakata is from Murewa in Mashonaland East Province and is a PhD graduate from the Department of Educational Foundations at the University of South Africa. Dr. Dzavo is from Shamva in Mashonaland Central Province and currently serves at Kabarore Teacher Training College under the Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB). As Shona scholars, they draw on their lived experiences, cultural heritage, and community ties to inform this research. The study was conducted in Seke Rural, Mashonaland East Province, on ancestral Shona lands. Both authors worked with teachers, administrators, and community elders in ways that honoured cultural protocols and respected Indigenous knowledge systems. Community elders

were deliberately engaged to provide cultural interpretation, validate heritage practices embedded in classroom activities, guide ethical engagement with participants, and support curriculum contextualisation through local knowledge systems. Their involvement ensured cultural authenticity, epistemic integrity, and community ownership of the research process. Their positionalities as Indigenous Zimbabweans rooted in Shona traditions directly informed methodological decisions, including participant selection, framing of interview questions, modes of classroom observation, ethical protocols, and interpretive analysis of Ubuntu values and heritage practices, ensuring that Ubuntu philosophy and local perspectives remained central throughout the research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Introduction

Heritage-Based Education has become a key part of global discussions on culturally responsive and transformative pedagogy, especially in regions where formal schooling has historically marginalised Indigenous knowledge systems. Across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, policymakers and educators are increasingly recognising the importance of incorporating local cultures, languages, and ethical principles into curricula to promote identity, social cohesion, and sustainable development (Garwe, 2025; Smith, 2006). The Ubuntu philosophy, emphasising relational ethics, communal responsibility, and human interconnectedness, is recognised worldwide as a model for fostering moral education and comprehensive learner development, especially in postcolonial nations seeking to decolonise and contextualise ethical learning (Wuta, 2025; Zhakata & Zireva, 2025). By integrating Ubuntu into heritage-based curricula, education can go beyond merely cognitive achievement to nurture learners' social, ethical, and cultural competencies in increasingly pluralistic and globalised societies. Heritage-based approaches also help address epistemic injustice by validating Indigenous knowledge systems that have long been marginalised within traditional curricula (Mutseekwa, 2024). This study situates the inquiry within this international debate, exploring how Heritage-Based Education functions as a catalyst, defined here as the driving force that enables and accelerates the meaningful integration of Ubuntu philosophy within primary school classrooms, while remaining sensitive to the Zimbabwean socio-cultural and policy context.

Historically, curriculum reforms in postcolonial contexts have oscillated between pursuing global competitiveness and preserving cultural identity. In Zimbabwe, early post-independence curricula sought to decolonise education by incorporating national history, Indigenous languages, and civic values, yet these reforms frequently retained Eurocentric content structures and epistemological assumptions (Mutseekwa, 2024). The Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) of the early 2000s marked a shift toward learner-centred, skills-oriented pedagogy, but failed to sufficiently integrate Indigenous knowledge systems or ethical philosophies such as Ubuntu (Wuta, 2025). Subsequent curriculum frameworks (2015–2022) emphasised structured learning outcomes aligned with national development objectives; however, significant gaps persisted in embedding cultural heritage and moral education in everyday classroom practice (Zhakata & Madikizela-Madya, 2025). The Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC), introduced in 2024, represents a deliberate policy intervention aimed at addressing these shortcomings by embedding Indigenous knowledge systems, heritage content, and Ubuntu principles across all learning areas, thereby positioning learners as active participants in cultural preservation, ethical formation, and innovation (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025; Garwe, 2025). This curricular shift mirrors broader global trends in which education systems increasingly seek to balance economic competitiveness with cultural sustainability, social justice, and ethical citizenship.

Despite these policy advances, a persistent gap remains between curriculum design and classroom implementation, particularly in rural primary schools. Teachers occupy a central role in translating curriculum policy into pedagogical practice, yet their perceptions, professional preparedness, and contextual realities significantly shape how Heritage-Based Education is enacted (Fullan, 2007). In practice, resource shortages, assessment-driven pedagogies, time constraints, and limited professional development opportunities often restrict teachers' capacity to meaningfully integrate heritage content and Ubuntu philosophy

into everyday teaching. Rural primary schools, while serving as custodians of Indigenous knowledge and cultural memory, frequently experience chronic under-resourcing, infrastructural limitations, and limited institutional support, thereby widening the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025; Mutseekwa, 2024). Understanding how teachers navigate these constraints and creatively adapt pedagogical strategies becomes essential for assessing whether Heritage-Based Education genuinely functions as a catalyst for Ubuntu integration or remains a symbolic policy gesture. Capturing teachers' lived experiences through classroom observations and document analysis provides critical insight into the operationalisation of heritage-based pedagogy, illuminating both successful practices and systemic barriers that shape learners' engagement with cultural identity, ethical values, and communal responsibility (Wuta, 2025; Zhakata & Zireva, 2025).

The significance of examining Heritage-Based Education transcends empirical description, extending into theoretical, practical, and policy domains. Theoretically, this study advances the integration of constructivist, Afrocentric, and Ubuntu-inspired pedagogical frameworks. While constructivism foregrounds active learner engagement and knowledge co-construction, it often lacks cultural specificity and risks perpetuating Eurocentric epistemologies if applied uncritically in postcolonial settings (Mutseekwa, 2024). Afrocentric theory complements constructivism by re-centering African worldviews, histories, and cultural logics, thereby affirming Indigenous epistemologies as legitimate sources of knowledge (Hlalele, 2019; Wuta, 2025). Ubuntu philosophy further enriches this theoretical synthesis by foregrounding communal responsibility, interdependence, and moral formation, thereby introducing an ethical and relational dimension. Together, these perspectives provide a holistic pedagogical framework capable of addressing both cognitive and ethical dimensions of learning, while simultaneously challenging colonial epistemic hierarchies and fostering culturally grounded educational practices. Practically, the study offers empirical

insights to support teachers in incorporating Indigenous knowledge, storytelling, collaborative learning, and community engagement into classroom instruction, thereby strengthening culturally responsive pedagogy (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025; Garwe, 2025). At a policy level, the findings inform curriculum design, teacher education, resource allocation, and assessment reform, aligning with global development agendas, particularly Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), four on inclusive and equitable quality education and 11 on safeguarding cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2017). By linking local classroom practices to broader regional and global discourses, the study underscores Heritage-Based Education as a transformative approach for cultivating socially responsible, culturally conscious, and ethically grounded learners.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the progressive intent of Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum, a critical implementation gap persists in translating policy ideals into effective classroom practice, particularly in integrating Ubuntu philosophy in primary school classrooms. While curriculum documents advocate the infusion of Indigenous knowledge systems, ethical values, and cultural heritage across learning areas, empirical evidence suggests that teachers often struggle to operationalise these directives in resource-constrained rural contexts (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025; Mutseekwa, 2024). Many educators lack adequate professional training, instructional materials, and institutional support to meaningfully embed Ubuntu principles into daily teaching and learning activities. Furthermore, assessment systems remain largely examination-driven, privileging cognitive achievement over ethical, cultural, and communal learning outcomes, thereby discouraging sustained pedagogical innovation.

This disconnect raises critical concerns about whether Heritage-Based Education genuinely functions as a catalyst, that is, a driving force that initiates, sustains, and deepens

the integration of Ubuntu philosophy, or merely serves as symbolic curricular rhetoric. Existing studies have primarily focused on policy analysis or theoretical advocacy, with limited empirical exploration of teachers' lived experiences, classroom practices, and contextual challenges in implementing heritage-based pedagogy (Garwe, 2025; Zhakata & Zireva, 2025). Consequently, there remains insufficient understanding of how teachers interpret Ubuntu, the strategies they employ to enact it, and the systemic barriers that constrain its effective integration within primary school settings. Addressing this gap is essential for informing teacher education, curriculum refinement, and policy implementation, ensuring that Heritage-Based Education fulfils its transformative potential rather than reproducing entrenched educational inequalities.

Research Question

Guided by the above problem, the central research question is: How does Heritage-Based Education function as a catalyst for integrating Ubuntu philosophy in primary school classrooms? This formulation deliberately aligns the study's title, problem statement, and analytical focus, foregrounding the catalytic role of Heritage-Based Education in shaping pedagogical practices, teacher agency, and learner development. By examining teacher perceptions, classroom enactments, and contextual constraints, the study seeks to generate empirically grounded insights into the conditions under which Ubuntu philosophy can meaningfully inform everyday teaching and learning.

Organisation of the Article

The paper is organised as follows: After the introduction, it reviews global, regional, and national literature on heritage-based curricula, Ubuntu philosophy, and teacher agency in curriculum reform. Next, the paper outlines the theoretical framework, integrating constructivist, Afrocentric, and Ubuntu-based perspectives. The paper also outlines the

qualitative methodology, which incorporates ethnography, narrative inquiry, philosophical analysis, and document review. In addition, discussions and findings, highlighting teachers' interpretations, instructional strategies, and implementation challenges, are presented. The paper then concludes by synthesising key insights and offering recommendations for policy development, teacher education, and future research.

Literature Review

This literature review examines key themes relevant to Heritage-Based Education and its role as a catalyst for integrating Ubuntu philosophy, organised into five main sections. It begins with Heritage-Based Education Globally and Regionally, exploring how curricula worldwide and across Africa embed Indigenous knowledge to foster cultural identity and ethical learning. The review then considers Ubuntu Philosophy in Education, highlighting its contribution to relational, participatory, and moral pedagogy. Next, Cultural Heritage and Curriculum discusses how tangible and intangible heritage are incorporated into teaching. The fourth section, Teachers' Role in Curriculum Implementation, emphasises teacher agency as central to operationalising heritage curricula and catalysing Ubuntu integration. Finally, the review notes areas where empirical evidence remains limited, particularly on how Heritage-Based Education functions as a catalyst in Zimbabwean primary school classrooms.

Heritage-Based Education Globally and Regionally

Globally, heritage-based curricula connect culture with education, preserving Indigenous knowledge while promoting identity, social cohesion, and ethical awareness. Countries such as New Zealand, Canada, and Australia integrate Indigenous knowledge and languages into national curricula, enhancing learner engagement and cultural pride (Garwe, 2025; Smith, 2006). These initiatives align with UNESCO guidelines and the SDGs,

particularly Goals four on inclusive education and 11 on cultural preservation (UNESCO, 2017; United Nations, 2015).

Regionally, African countries have pursued curriculum decolonisation, embedding Indigenous epistemologies and philosophies. South Africa's CAPS and Kenya's competency-based curricula include local histories, oral traditions, and moral values guided by Ubuntu ethics (Wuta, 2025). Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum follows this trend, integrating heritage knowledge, skills, and ethical principles while promoting creativity and critical thinking (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025; Dadirayi, 2025; Garwe, 2025). Comparative studies highlight the dual challenge of balancing cultural preservation with global literacy demands while illustrating how heritage education can act as a catalyst for ethical and communal learning (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ubuntu Philosophy in Education

Ubuntu, articulated as "I am because we are," foregrounds relational ethics, empathy, and cooperation (Letseka, 2012, p. 31). Ubuntu-inspired pedagogy encourages participatory, collaborative learning and provides an ethical framework for heritage-based curricula. Southern African studies show that Ubuntu principles promote social cohesion, moral responsibility, and community engagement, offering an alternative to individualistic Western approaches (Zhakata & Zireva, 2025). In Zimbabwe, Ubuntu guides HBC classroom practices such as peer mentoring, group work, and community projects, helping teachers catalyse the integration of ethical, relational, and cultural values in learners' daily experiences (Wuta, 2025). Globally, Ubuntu resonates with inclusive, collaborative, and social-emotional learning frameworks, providing insights for cross-cultural, ethics-oriented education (Garwe, 2025).

Cultural Heritage and Curriculum

Cultural heritage encompasses tangible artefacts, landscapes, and intangible practices such as oral histories, rituals, and Indigenous languages (Smith, 2006; UNESCO, 2017). Integrating heritage into curricula fosters identity formation, engagement, and critical thinking, while enabling learners to connect academic content with lived experiences (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025; Garwe, 2025). In Zimbabwe, HBC implements mother-tongue instruction, storytelling, and community artefacts to promote experiential learning and cultural validation (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025). Similar global initiatives, such as Māori knowledge integration in New Zealand, demonstrate that heritage education can unify local knowledge, national identity, and global skills, further highlighting its catalytic role in shaping learners' ethical and cultural development (Smith, 2006).

Teachers' Role in Curriculum Implementation

Teachers are central to translating heritage-based curricula into practice, mediating between policy goals and local cultural knowledge (Garwe, 2025). Teacher agency determines how effectively heritage and Ubuntu principles are enacted. Positive teacher perceptions, cultural competence, and pedagogical creativity facilitate heritage integration, while limited training, resources, and systemic pressures hinder implementation (Alidou et al., 2019). In Zimbabwe, rural teachers creatively adapt lesson plans using storytelling, experiential learning, and community engagement to operationalise Ubuntu and heritage content despite structural constraints (Mutseekwa, 2024; Zhakata & Zireva, 2025). Regional studies in South Africa and Kenya corroborate that teacher preparedness and autonomy influence the quality of heritage education, while international evidence from Canada and New Zealand indicates that institutional support enhances teacher-led curriculum innovation (Garwe, 2025). These findings show how teacher practices act as mechanisms through which Heritage-Based Education catalyses Ubuntu integration in classrooms.

Despite strong theoretical and policy support for heritage-based education, empirical evidence remains limited on its catalytic function in primary schools. Few studies document how teachers operationalise heritage curricula, enact Ubuntu pedagogy, or navigate contextual challenges in rural Zimbabwe. Addressing this gap is essential to understanding how Heritage-Based Education can function as a catalyst for ethical, relational, and culturally grounded learning, informing teacher education, curriculum refinement, and policy design.

By synthesising global, regional, and local literature, this review highlights how Heritage-Based Education and Ubuntu philosophy are intertwined, emphasising the teachers' central role as catalysts in translating policy into practice, and situates the study within broader debates on culturally responsive and transformative pedagogy.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multi-perspective theoretical framework to explore how Heritage-Based Education serves as a catalyst for integrating Ubuntu philosophy into primary school classrooms while preserving cultural heritage. No single theory sufficiently explains the complex interplay between pedagogy, teacher agency, cultural identity, and ethical learning. Constructivist learning theory highlights active knowledge construction but does not fully address communal values (Piaget, 1954). Afrocentric theory foregrounds African epistemologies yet often lacks practical classroom strategies (Mazama, 2001). Ubuntu pedagogy emphasizes relational ethics and social responsibility but requires alignment with curriculum structures to be effective in schools (Mutseekwa, 2024; Wuta, 2025). By integrating constructivist, Afrocentric, and Ubuntu frameworks alongside curriculum implementation models, this study provides a holistic analytical lens linking classroom practices, teacher agency, and cultural context to support Ubuntu integration.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist learning theory, developed by Piaget (1954) and Vygotsky (1978), emphasises the active construction of knowledge within socio-cultural environments. Learners assimilate and accommodate new knowledge into existing mental structures, while the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights the collaborative potential achieved through social support. In heritage-based education, constructivism enables learners to co-construct knowledge grounded in local culture, actively engaging with Indigenous knowledge systems and ethical practices. Assimilation and accommodation processes support learners in interpreting heritage content, while guiding collaborative and participatory Ubuntu-oriented classroom activities (Zhakata & Zireva, 2025). Globally, constructivist approaches facilitate contextualised, learner-centred education, ensuring meaningful engagement with both cognitive and cultural content.

Afrocentric Education Theory

Afrocentric education theory, advanced by Asante (1991) and Mazama (2001), centres African epistemologies, histories, and cultural values, challenging Eurocentric knowledge dominance. Alone, Afrocentric theory does not address pedagogical techniques, yet it provides the foundation for embedding cultural identity, heritage validation, and communal values in the curriculum. In the Heritage-Based Curriculum, Afrocentric principles legitimise Indigenous knowledge and reinforce Ubuntu philosophy, enabling learners to reclaim cultural agency and communal identity. Empirical research in Southern Africa shows that Afrocentric-informed curricula enhance engagement, moral reasoning, and critical thinking (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025; Wuta, 2025).

Ubuntu as a Pedagogical Philosophy

Ubuntu pedagogy, articulated by Ramose (2003) and Letseka (2012), emphasises relational ethics, cooperative learning, and communal responsibility. On its own, Ubuntu

lacks detailed guidance for classroom implementation or curriculum alignment. Embedded in heritage-based education, Ubuntu operationalises ethical values through storytelling, collaborative projects, peer mentoring, and community engagement, fostering social cohesion, empathy, and moral development (Zhakata & Zireva, 2025). Globally, its principles resonate with relational, values-based, and inclusive pedagogy, aligning with holistic education and UNESCO's (2017) Education for Sustainable Development frameworks.

Curriculum Implementation Models

Curriculum implementation models, as developed by Fullan (2007) and Rogan and Grayson (2003), emphasise the interaction among teacher capacity, school support, and contextual constraints. Implementation theory addresses gaps in the previous frameworks by linking teacher agency, resources, and systemic factors to the practical enactment of heritage-based Ubuntu pedagogy. Empirical studies in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa show that curriculum success depends on aligning pedagogical strategies with local realities, professional development, and supportive policy (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025; Mutseekwa, 2024). Internationally, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand highlight the importance of systemic support for integrating Indigenous knowledge into mainstream curricula (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Smith, 2012).

Synthesis

Together, these frameworks form a complementary analytical lens. Constructivism ensures learners actively co-construct knowledge from cultural and heritage experiences, Afrocentric theory validates African epistemologies and fosters identity, Ubuntu guides ethical and communal pedagogy, and curriculum implementation models address contextual, institutional, and systemic factors. This multi-perspective approach explains how Heritage-Based Education catalyses the integration of Ubuntu philosophy by connecting classroom

strategies, teacher agency, cultural content, and ethical development. By acknowledging the limitations of each theory individually and combining them, this framework offers a robust foundation for exploring the practical, cultural, and ethical dimensions of heritage-based pedagogy in Zimbabwean primary schools.

Methodology

Research Design and Sampling

This study employed a qualitative research approach using an ethnographic case study design, focusing on the Shona ethnic group in Seke Rural, Mashonaland East Province. Ethnography was selected for its suitability in exploring cultural practices, ethical values, and classroom pedagogy within their natural social contexts, as it enables in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes (Atkinson, 2007). The study was conducted over 16 weeks, allowing for prolonged engagement in the field, which enhanced contextual sensitivity and facilitated the generation of rich, nuanced insights into heritage-based pedagogical practices. Purposive sampling identified five primary school teachers (Tea 1–5), two school administrators (Adi 1–2), and two community elders (ComLea 1–2). Participants were selected based on direct involvement with Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC) delivery and knowledge of local heritage practices, ensuring meaningful engagement with cultural and ethical pedagogy (Dadirayi, 2025).

Data Collection and Role of Community Elders

Data collection combined semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Interviews captured participants' experiences, while observations focused on teaching strategies, learner engagement, interactions, and enactment of Ubuntu values. Documents analysed included syllabi, lesson plans, teaching aids, and policy guides. Community elders contributed to validating heritage practices, interpreting cultural content,

and ensuring ethical compliance, guiding both curriculum contextualisation and culturally sensitive research engagement. By triangulating interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, the study enhanced the credibility and interpretive depth of the findings, allowing patterns and themes to be cross-verified across multiple data sources. This approach aligns with established qualitative methodology and reflexive thematic analysis principles, which emphasise methodological coherence and the iterative development of themes (Byrne, 2021).

Trustworthiness and Data Analysis

Credibility was enhanced through member checking, prolonged engagement, and triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents, consistent with established qualitative research practices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In line with Sandstrom (2018), dependability and confirmability were supported via systematic coding, audit trails, and reflective journaling, while transferability was strengthened through detailed contextual descriptions. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis framework, which guided iterative coding procedures. Open coding was used to identify initial patterns, followed by focused coding to develop themes linked to the research questions. Philosophical reflection was employed as a complementary analytic strategy to interrogate the underlying assumptions, values, and theoretical implications of the data, enhancing interpretive depth and aligning analysis with the study's epistemological stance (Byrne, 2021). Themes were validated with participants and cross-compared across data sources, producing a nuanced understanding of Heritage-Based Education as a driving force for integrating Ubuntu philosophy in primary school classrooms (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

This study explored how the Heritage-Based Curriculum functions as a catalyst for integrating Ubuntu philosophy in Zimbabwean primary school classrooms. Data were collected through interviews with teachers, school administrators, and community leaders, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans and teaching materials. The findings are presented under four main themes: Teacher, Administrator, and Community Leader Perspectives on the Heritage-Based Curriculum; Integration of Ubuntu in Classrooms; Cultural Heritage as Content and Context; and Curriculum Implementation Challenges. An introductory statement precedes each theme, followed by triangulated findings supported with verbatim quotes from the three participant groups.

Table 1*Themes and Sources of Evidence*

Theme	Source of Evidence
Teacher, Administrator, and Community Leader Perspectives on HBC	Interviews, Observations, Documents
Integration of Ubuntu in Classrooms	Interviews, Observations, Documents
Cultural Heritage as Content and Context	Interviews, Observations, Documents
Curriculum Implementation Challenges	Interviews, Observations, Documents

Teacher, Administrator, and Community Leader Perspectives on the Heritage-Based Curriculum

Participants acknowledged the value of the Heritage-Based Curriculum in restoring cultural content, ethical frameworks, and local knowledge into primary education. Teachers highlighted its potential to reconnect learners with their Shona heritage and reinforce social cohesion.

A teacher observed, *"This curriculum finally brings our culture back to the classroom; our children must know where they come from"* (Tea3, interview).

An administrator noted, *"While curriculum documents emphasise integrating cultural heritage across subjects to foster identity and cohesion, we remain incapacitated here"* (Adi2, interview).

A community leader added, *"We see our values and stories being taught; it ensures the next generation understands who we are and what we stand for"* (ComLea1, interview).

Classroom observations confirmed that teachers actively referred to heritage content, including folktales, local languages, and cultural artefacts. Document analysis of lesson plans and thematic objectives showed explicit inclusion of cultural topics, ethical learning outcomes, and structured strategies to embed heritage knowledge across subjects. Findings across instruments indicate that participants recognise the Heritage-Based Curriculum as a driving force, fostering awareness and philosophical engagement with Ubuntu, though structural and resource constraints moderate its full potential.

Integration of Ubuntu in Classrooms

The Heritage-Based Curriculum operates as the catalyst for operationalising Ubuntu principles through social, moral, and collaborative learning activities. Ubuntu was evident in classroom interactions, peer engagement, and facilitation of group work.

A teacher stated, *"I always remind learners to listen carefully to each other and treat everyone with respect because that is the foundation of Ubuntu"* (Tea1, interview).

An administrator added, *"We coordinate with communities to ensure moral and social learning is reinforced beyond textbooks"* (Adi2, interview).

A community leader remarked, *"During cultural day, the children learn respect, cooperation, and caring directly from those who have lived our traditions"* (ComLea2, interview).

Observation data illustrated learners engaged in group problem-solving, peer mentoring, and collaborative storytelling, while lesson plans specified activities such as communal role-play and ethics-focused discussions. Document analysis confirmed that Ubuntu objectives are embedded in curricular goals, particularly under themes of cooperation, moral reasoning, and community participation. Findings across instruments show consistent operationalisation of Ubuntu through social and moral learning activities, confirming that Heritage-Based Curriculum intent translates into practice. Teachers actively facilitate peer mentoring, group work, and community-linked projects, enhancing moral reasoning and relational skills. Triangulated evidence highlights that Ubuntu is not only theoretical but shapes behaviours and interactions, supporting holistic development and cultural continuity. Limitations such as overcrowding occasionally hinder full implementation, underscoring the importance of systemic support. This demonstrates that while teachers embrace Ubuntu philosophically, context and infrastructure significantly influence its enactment.

Cultural Heritage as Content and Context

The Heritage-Based Curriculum embeds cultural heritage into both subject matter and pedagogical strategies, ensuring lessons reflect local histories, language, and traditions. This theme illustrates how the curriculum acts as a framework for culturally responsive teaching.

A teacher explained, *"We teach traditional farming methods and local history to connect learners with their roots"* (Tea4, interview).

An administrator highlighted, *"We work closely with cultural leaders and parents to ensure heritage is respected and passed on"* (Adi1, interview).

A community leader noted, *"Our stories, songs, and proverbs are now part of what children learn daily, not just on special occasions"* (ComLea1, interview).

Observations confirmed that lessons included local songs, folktales, historical narratives, and mother-tongue instruction. Document analysis showed that teaching guides incorporated both tangible and intangible heritage content, including artefacts, maps, and community-linked projects. Findings across instruments reveal that heritage is not merely content but a lens through which learners experience education, reinforcing identity, ethical understanding, and community-mindedness. Triangulation confirms alignment between teacher practices, administrative support, and curricular objectives, demonstrating that the Heritage-Based Curriculum effectively mediates heritage integration and acts as a catalyst for contextualised pedagogy.

Curriculum Implementation Challenges

Although the Heritage-Based Curriculum provides a framework for Ubuntu integration and cultural inclusion, systemic constraints affect its enactment. These challenges include insufficient resources, limited training, misaligned assessments, and structural pressures such as large class sizes.

A teacher stated, *"We lack enough textbooks and cultural materials to teach the heritage topics well"* (Tea2, interview).

Another teacher noted, *"We received little training; it is hard to teach something new without proper guidance"* (Tea5, interview).

An administrator added, *"Curriculum intentions are ambitious, but support structures and assessment systems do not always match these goals"* (Adi1, interview).

Observation revealed overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional time, and inconsistent integration of heritage activities. Document analysis showed that while lesson plans included heritage objectives, operational guidelines for resource allocation and assessment adaptation were lacking. Findings across instruments indicate that teacher agency mitigates some challenges through creative adaptations, yet systemic support is essential for

full realisation of the curriculum's transformative potential. Triangulated evidence confirms that while the Heritage-Based Curriculum functions as the catalyst for Ubuntu pedagogy, structural, material, and administrative factors significantly influence the depth and quality of implementation.

Discussion of Findings

Teacher, Administrator, and Community Leader Perspectives on the Heritage-Based Curriculum

The findings show that teachers, administrators, and community leaders recognize the Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC) as a vehicle for restoring Shona cultural knowledge and ethical values in primary education. Teachers' adaptive practices and enthusiasm exemplify strong teacher agency, mediating between policy intent and classroom realities. Through a constructivist lens, learners and educators actively co-construct knowledge grounded in cultural experiences, while teachers scaffold learning through storytelling and contextual examples (Piaget, 1954; Vygotsky, 1978). Afrocentric theory validates these practices, emphasizing the affirmation of Indigenous epistemologies and fostering learners' cultural identity (Asante, 1991; Mazama, 2001). The involvement of community elders ensures that heritage content is authentic and culturally relevant, demonstrating that local resources and institutional support are essential components in translating curriculum policy into practice (Fullan, 2007; Rogan & Grayson, 2003). These insights confirm that stakeholder perceptions are critical catalysts for operationalizing heritage-based education.

Integration of Ubuntu in Classrooms

Ubuntu principles were operationalized through cooperative learning, peer mentoring, collaborative storytelling, and ethics-focused discussions. Ubuntu pedagogy informs these practices by guiding relational and moral development, fostering empathy, social

responsibility, and communal cohesion (Letseka, 2012; Ramose, 2003). Constructivist theory explains how learners assimilate and accommodate ethical and cultural knowledge, actively engaging in participatory learning that aligns with the Zone of Proximal Development (Zhakata & Zireva, 2025). The Afrocentric lens reinforces that relational and ethical content is culturally anchored, while curriculum implementation models demonstrate that teacher agency, resource use, and contextual adaptation are essential for sustaining Ubuntu integration (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025; Mutseekwa, 2024). Collectively, these frameworks explain the transition of Ubuntu from abstract philosophy to tangible classroom behaviours.

Cultural Heritage as Content and Context

Embedding tangible and intangible cultural heritage, including local histories, folktales, songs, proverbs, and mother-tongue instruction, showed that heritage functions as both content and pedagogical context. Constructivist theory highlights active learner engagement with heritage content, while Afrocentric theory validates Indigenous knowledge and strengthens cultural identity (Mazama, 2001; Wuta, 2025). Ubuntu pedagogy ensures heritage learning is relational and community-oriented, fostering cooperative and ethically grounded interactions. The participation of community elders demonstrates intergenerational knowledge transfer and provides guidance for culturally authentic practices. According to curriculum implementation models, teacher capacity, available local resources, and supportive systemic structures are critical to ensuring that heritage integration in classrooms is both meaningful and sustainable.

Curriculum Implementation Challenges

Structural constraints, including limited teaching resources, insufficient professional training, misaligned assessments, and large class sizes, moderated the depth of HBC implementation. Teachers' creative adaptations, such as collaborative learning activities and

culturally grounded lessons, illustrate the mediating role of teacher agency in overcoming these challenges. Constructivist theory supports continued learner engagement through peer-mediated instruction, even under resource limitations. Ubuntu pedagogy emphasizes that relational and communal values can flourish when teachers strategically adapt their practices. Afrocentric theory highlights that maintaining cultural authenticity is possible despite systemic barriers. Empirical research in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa demonstrates that curriculum success depends on aligning pedagogical strategies with local realities, teacher expertise, and supportive policy structures (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025; Mutseekwa, 2024). These combined perspectives explain how the HBC can still function as a catalyst for ethical, relational, and culturally grounded learning when teacher initiative and contextual responsiveness are maximized.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its single-site ethnographic design conducted in a rural primary school in Seke Rural, Mashonaland East Province. While the findings provide rich, contextually grounded insights, they are not intended for statistical generalisation; analytical transferability to similar socio-cultural and educational settings is suggested, but multi-site research would strengthen comparative conclusions. A second limitation concerns the interpretive and time-bound nature of the inquiry. The limited purposive sample, combined with the absence of direct learner perspectives and the duration of fieldwork, constrains understanding of long-term outcomes of Heritage-Based Education and sustained Ubuntu integration. Systematic thematic analysis, triangulation, and reflexive practices were employed to enhance rigor, yet longitudinal and participatory studies would further illuminate the enduring impact on learner development.

Conclusion

This paper shows that teachers' perceptions, the integration of Ubuntu, and the embedding of heritage content are crucial for improving learning in Zimbabwean primary schools. Teachers displayed a variety of attitudes towards heritage-based education, from enthusiasm to cautious ambivalence, yet they consistently showed initiative in adjusting lessons to reflect cultural and ethical values. Heritage-Based Education served as the primary catalyst for integrating Ubuntu philosophy, operationalising its principles through cooperative learning, mentorship, and community involvement, promoting relational and moral growth alongside cognitive development. Heritage was not only content but also context, evident in folktales, local history, mother-tongue instruction, and cultural artefacts, which enhanced students' identity and participation. However, challenges such as scarce resources, gaps in teacher training, and misaligned assessment practices limited full curriculum implementation. These findings support and expand upon constructivist, Afrocentric, and Ubuntu theoretical frameworks, demonstrating how culturally grounded, ethics-based teaching can be practically used to enrich learning and identity formation at local, regional, and global levels.

The study makes important contributions to theory, policy, and practice. Theoretically, it shows how constructivist, Afrocentric, and Ubuntu frameworks come together in classroom practice, expanding existing knowledge on culturally responsive pedagogy and ethical education. Practically, it provides insights into teacher agency, curriculum adaptation, and heritage integration, offering a model that other postcolonial settings can follow to boost identity, ethics, and academic engagement. On the policy level, findings underline the importance of teacher professional development, culturally relevant resources, assessment frameworks aligned with heritage principles, and well-structured community-school partnerships. Heritage-Based Education is shown to drive classroom practices that operationalise Ubuntu, bridging policy intentions with practical outcomes. Regionally, the research supports Southern African efforts to decolonise education by documenting strategies

that can be replicated to embed local knowledge into curricula. Globally, it adds to the conversation on heritage-based and culturally responsive education, showing how ethical, cognitive, and cultural aspects can be balanced to create sustainable, inclusive learning outcomes, thus connecting national reforms to Sustainable Development Goal four and broader international educational priorities.

The article advocates for comprehensive teacher training on heritage pedagogy and Ubuntu-informed teaching to ensure educators can implement culturally grounded curricula. Educational authorities should provide teaching materials, including local histories, folktales, and mother-tongue resources, to facilitate authentic learning experiences. Assessment frameworks ought to evaluate cultural literacy, ethical reasoning, and identity development alongside academic achievement. Structured, heritage-based curriculum implementation, supported by longitudinal monitoring, can ensure that Ubuntu and cultural values continue to meaningfully shape student outcomes. Longitudinal research is essential to monitor the lasting impact of Heritage-Based Education on student outcomes, while structured community-school partnerships should be formalised to promote intergenerational knowledge transfer and civic engagement. Implementing these recommendations will boost teacher capacity, improve curriculum implementation, and establish Heritage-Based Education as a transformative catalyst for cultural preservation, ethical learning, and globally relevant pedagogical innovation in Zimbabwe and similar contexts.

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