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The Paradox of Inclusion: A Philosophical Investigation into Universality and Particularity of Heritage in Education

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Abstract

This paper philosophically interrogates the paradox inherent in Heritage-Based Education (HBE) and its impact on inclusive education in primary schools in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe. While HBE aims to affirm local cultural identities and redress colonial epistemic marginalisation, it simultaneously raises tensions between the universal ideals of inclusion and the particularities of cultural heritage. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with three school administrators and six teachers, classroom observations, and document analysis, the study reveals how heritage affirmation sometimes conflicts with the

imperative to accommodate diverse learner identities. Through conceptual analysis grounded in theories of justice, recognition, and Ubuntu philosophy, the paper critically examines whether HBE fosters genuine inclusivity or inadvertently perpetuates exclusion. It argues that resolving this paradox requires a dynamic and dialogical approach to heritage, one that respects cultural specificity while embracing pluralism and participatory justice. The findings contribute to philosophical debates on education, identity, and the normative foundations of inclusive pedagogy.

Keywords: *Colonial legacy, Community, Culture, Curriculum, Identity, Indigenous music.*

Introduction

The introduction of Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Education (HBE) policy in 2024 marked a significant paradigm shift in primary education, foregrounding cultural identity, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and communal values as foundational to learning. Rooted in the goals of promoting innovation, self-reliance, and national pride, the HBE curriculum seeks to address post-colonial epistemic injustice by reorienting learners toward local histories, languages, and practices (Chikukwa, Chinooneka & Mavuru, 2023). This vision resonates with broader decolonial movements across the Global South that challenge Eurocentric educational models and call for knowledge pluralism (Muwati, Mheta & Mutasa, 2021). Yet, as these curricular reforms unfold, they encounter a global normative imperative: inclusive education. International frameworks such as *Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, adopted by the United Nations, along with UNESCO's 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report, advocate for equity, participation, and access for all learners regardless of background or ability (UNESCO, 2020). The potential collision between culturally-particular curricula and globally-endorsed inclusive ideals raises important philosophical questions regarding justice, recognition, and educational purpose.

Inclusive education, once understood narrowly as integrating learners with disabilities, now encompasses broader ethical principles of non-discrimination, full participation, and epistemic access (Ainscow & Messiou, 2020). Nussbaum (2021) and Sen (2021) conceptualise inclusion as a matter of justice that enables all learners to develop capabilities needed to function as dignified members of society. Such an approach treats inclusion not merely as physical presence in the classroom, but as full participation in educational meaning-making. However, this

universalist orientation sometimes overlooks the demands of cultural specificity and localised belonging. As Young, Hayward, and Fraser (2022) argue, social justice also requires recognition of group specific identities and historical exclusions. From this standpoint, HBE can be seen as a corrective to colonial erasures that historically excluded African voices from the curriculum. Nonetheless, the more a curriculum draws on shared cultural heritage, the more it risks marginalising those who do not belong to the dominant cultural group.

This philosophical tension forms the central question of this study: Can a curriculum that privileges heritage as a particularistic expression of identity also satisfy the universalistic demands of inclusion? This question is especially pertinent in the Zimbabwean context, where learners from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds co-exist within the same classrooms. The HBE curriculum, though noble in its restorative intent, may inadvertently reproduce new forms of exclusion if it essentialises culture or overlooks pluralism (Nyoni & Mahlangu, 2023). The tension is not merely practical or pedagogical; it is philosophical in that it invites reflection on the meaning of justice, the boundaries of community, and the ethics of recognition in education.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 develops the conceptual and philosophical framework, defining heritage-based education and inclusive education, unpacking the theoretical tension between universalism and particularism. Section 3 presents the methodological approach and data sources. Section 4 offers a critical analysis of empirical findings, organised under three themes: epistemic access, cultural representation, and pedagogical practices. Section 5 engages in philosophical reflection, drawing on Ubuntu, Recognition Theory, and Critical Pluralism to evaluate the ethical dimensions of the HBE-inclusion paradox. Finally, Section 6 concludes with implications for curriculum reform and philosophical insight into the future of inclusive education in heritage-focused societies.

Conceptual and Philosophical Framework

This section explores the conceptual and philosophical foundations underpinning Heritage-Based Education (HBE) and inclusive education in Zimbabwe. It situates the HBE curriculum within broader efforts to affirm local knowledge, cultural values, and indigenous epistemologies, while critically examining how these initiatives interact with universal ideals of inclusion and equity. The discussion highlights the philosophical

tensions between particularity and universality, offering a lens through which to understand the opportunities and challenges of implementing culturally-grounded yet inclusively-oriented educational policies.

Heritage-Based Education: Definitions and Aims

The Heritage-Based Education (HBE) curriculum introduced in Zimbabwe in 2024 represents a significant shift in curriculum design towards the affirmation of local knowledge, cultural values, and indigenous epistemologies. Rooted in the vision of Zimbabwe's education reforms under the Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework, this policy seeks to decolonise schooling by integrating the lived experiences, practices, and worldviews of Zimbabwean communities into formal education. By drawing upon cultural artefacts, oral traditions, and communal philosophies, HBE aims to foster a sense of rootedness and relevance in young learners (Chikukwa et al., 2023). The initiative reflects a broader African epistemic resurgence that seeks to counter Eurocentric dominance in curriculum design, aligning with calls by scholars for the revalorisation of indigenous systems of knowledge (Muwati et al., 2021).

In the Zimbabwean context, heritage is conceptualised not merely as historical artefact, but as a living source of knowledge production. Teachers are expected to infuse classroom instruction with local idioms, folklore, and culturally-grounded learning experiences (Nyoni et al., 2023). This has the potential to deepen student engagement and identity formation. However, the implementation of such an approach demands careful philosophical scrutiny, especially in light of the growing push towards inclusive education. Muwati et al. (2021) aver that the strength of heritage-centred pedagogy lies in its potential to affirm cultural dignity and foster epistemic justice. Yet it simultaneously raises normative questions regarding whose heritage is included and whose is omitted, thereby introducing internal exclusions even within ostensibly inclusive frameworks (Nyoni & Mahlangu, 2023).

Inclusive Education: Normative Ideals

Globally, inclusive education is recognised as a moral imperative grounded in human dignity, non-discrimination, and social justice. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) defines inclusive education as the process of addressing and responding to the diversity of learners' needs through increased participation and reduced exclusion. This definition transcends issues of disability to encompass race, ethnicity, language, gender, and socio-economic status. Inclusion, in this

sense, is not simply about access to the classroom, but about meaningful participation and recognition.

Philosophically, inclusive education is underpinned by the Capabilities Approach articulated by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. According to Nussbaum (2021), true inclusion requires that every child be given the substantive freedoms to achieve life plans they have reason to value, irrespective of cultural or bodily differences. Similarly, Sen (2021) emphasises the importance of creating conditions for human flourishing beyond mere formal equality. These perspectives help move the discourse from integration into structures toward transformation of those very structures to accommodate multiplicity. Accordingly UNESCO (2020) reinforces this, noting that schools must actively adapt to diversity rather than expecting students to adapt to standardised norms. Therefore, inclusion is not only a policy matter but a philosophical principle tied to universal dignity.

The Paradox of Universality and Particularity

A central philosophical challenge in Heritage-Based Education is reconciling the universalism of inclusion with the particularism of cultural affirmation. This paradox reveals itself when heritage-based policies, while well-intentioned, privilege dominant or hegemonic cultural narratives and exclude minority epistemologies. Universalism, often associated with thinkers like John Rawls and Martha Nussbaum, asserts that certain moral and political principles such as fairness, dignity, and equality, ought to apply to all individuals regardless of context (Nussbaum, 2021). This view is central to the ideal of inclusive education, as it rests on the assumption of a shared human moral status.

By contrast, the emphasis on particularity emerges strongly in Ubuntu philosophy and in the writings of Young et al. (2022). They caution against universal frameworks that ignore difference in the name of equality and instead advocate for a politics of difference, where justice entails the recognition and accommodation of group-specific identities and histories. Ubuntu, similarly, posits that personhood is defined relationally and communally, suggesting that education must honour the specific cultural landscapes in which learners are embedded (Nussbaum, 2021). However, privileging particularity without critical reflexivity may risk re-inscribing the very exclusions that inclusive education seeks to dismantle (Young et al., 2022).

This tension is especially pronounced in multilingual and multiethnic contexts such as Zimbabwe, where heritage itself is internally plural. If

not critically managed, HBE could inadvertently solidify ethnic majoritarianism by foregrounding one group's traditions as representative of national identity. Thus, while universal inclusion demands openness to all, heritage-based curricula must guard against the fossilisation of selective traditions at the expense of others (Nyoni & Mahlangu, 2023). This calls for a more complex philosophical negotiation between the local and the global.

Philosophical Concepts Applied

To navigate this tension, several inter-connected philosophical frameworks offer useful insights. Recognition Theory, as articulated by Taylor (2021) and Young et al. (2022), asserts that individual and collective identity is shaped by the way others respond to, and acknowledge, one's existence and culture. A failure to recognise difference, cultural, linguistic, or otherwise, constitutes not merely a moral error but a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). Education policies must, therefore, be attentive to the politics of recognition in their construction and delivery.

Ubuntu philosophy, with its emphasis on relational personhood and the principle "I am because we are" (Mbigi, 2021; Wiredu, 2021), provides a normative lens through which inclusion can be reimagined. Here, inclusion is not only about presence, but about meaningful participation in community, grounded in mutual care and solidarity. Ubuntu, thus, challenges both exclusionary universalism and uncritical particularism by insisting on ethical reciprocity, promoting a vision of education that is both communally rooted and expansively inclusive.

Critical Pluralism also becomes central (Young, 2022; Nyoni & Mahlangu, 2023). It urges people to move beyond tokenistic multiculturalism and embrace robust engagement with difference that affirms multiple epistemologies while maintaining common normative goals. As such, the philosophical task is not to choose between universality and particularity, but to articulate a framework in which both can be held in dynamic and reflexive tension. In this way, education becomes a site of ethical negotiation and epistemic plurality rather than dogmatic assertion (Sen, 2021; Nussbaum, 2021).

Methodology

This section presents the methodological approach used to examine the implementation and impact of the Heritage-Based Education (HBE) curriculum. It outlines the research design, participant selection, data

generation methods, analytical procedures, and ethical considerations, highlighting how each element contributed to trustworthy and contextually grounded insights.

Research Methodology and Design

This study employed qualitative research as its methodology, widely regarded as suitable for investigating complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2022). Using a case study design, the research allowed for a detailed and holistic examination of the interplay between policy and practice in education, capturing subtleties and nuances that quantitative approaches might overlook. By contextualising data within the lived experiences of participants, the study provided a rich, nuanced understanding of how the Heritage-Based Education (HBE) policy operates in practice. The flexibility of this design also enabled the integration of philosophical reflection with empirical data, which is essential for the normative critique central to this research. Ultimately, the case study facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the contradictions and complementarities between cultural affirmation and social inclusion, capturing the lived realities of participants while examining how policies are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted in real-world educational settings.

Participants

Three primary schools in Chitungwiza were purposively selected for the study due to their early and active adoption of the Heritage-Based Education (HBE) curriculum. This selection ensured access to participants who had firsthand, practical experiences with the curriculum implementation, allowing for in-depth, contextualised insights. The demographic diversity within these schools also provided a meaningful context for examining how inclusive education unfolds amid cultural particularity. Participants included three school administrators and six classroom teachers, capturing both managerial and pedagogical perspectives. Learners were excluded from the study to focus specifically on the experiences and reflections of educators who directly implement and mediate the curriculum, thereby enabling a more precise exploration of teaching practices and policy enactment. Purposive sampling allowed the study to concentrate on participants with relevant, specialised knowledge, facilitating the collection of rich and contextual insights. Although this sampling method is selective and non-random, limiting the

generalisability of findings, the deep engagement with key stakeholders uncovered both practical and ethical dimensions of the curriculum's impact by drawing on their direct, professional perspectives.

Data Generation Methods

The data generation methods employed were semi-structured interviews with school administrators and teachers, classroom observations, and document analysis, to enhance trustworthiness through triangulation (Baxter & Jack, 2021; Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2020). Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their perspectives and experiences openly, providing rich, detailed qualitative data. The flexibility of this approach encouraged the emergence of unexpected themes related to inclusion and cultural identity. Classroom observations offered direct insights into pedagogical practices and learner interactions, showing how heritage content was integrated into teaching. Document analysis of school record books provided a critical verification of curriculum implementation, ensuring that reported practices were aligned with official records. Together, these complementary methods generated a comprehensive dataset that grounded normative analysis in empirical evidence.

Analytical Approach

Thematic coding was used to systematically categorise and interpret the qualitative data collected. This method enabled the identification of recurrent patterns and divergences relevant to inclusion and heritage education. Beyond mere description, the analysis incorporated reflective philosophical interpretation to explore normative tensions within the data. By linking empirical themes to concepts such as recognition and epistemic justice, the analysis went beyond surface-level findings to engage deeper ethical questions. The iterative process of coding and reflection refined the study's insights and reinforced its critical stance, ensuring a rigorous and thoughtful examination of how heritage education impacted inclusive schooling.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to strict ethical guidelines, including informed consent and the protection of participant anonymity through pseudonyms. Respecting participants' autonomy was paramount; this was ensured by clearly informing them of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, which helped protect their freedom of choice.

Institutional ethical approval was sought and granted prior to data collection, demonstrating adherence to established research norms and providing formal oversight of the study's ethical conduct (Orb et al., 2020). Ethical sensitivity was particularly important given the study's focus on cultural identity and inclusion. By carefully addressing these sensitive topics, the research built trust and ensured that participants felt safe, contributing to the authenticity and credibility of the data collected.

Empirical Findings and Philosophical Analysis

This section presents the empirical findings and philosophical analysis of the study, highlighting how Heritage-Based Education (HBE) interacts with inclusive practices in Zimbabwean primary schools. It integrates teachers' and administrators' perspectives, classroom observations, and document analysis to reveal the complex interplay between cultural affirmation, pedagogical approaches, and the challenges of achieving equitable inclusion.

Coding and Participant Anonymisation

The qualitative data gathered from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis were subjected to thematic coding, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) method of systematically categorising and interpreting data. Each interview transcript was repeatedly read to identify emergent themes around heritage affirmation, inclusion, and pedagogical practice. Codes such as *cultural traditions*, *inclusion challenges*, and *pedagogical strategies* were refined through iterative comparison. Participants were anonymised using codes, with administrators assigned as A1, A2, A3 and teachers as T1 to T6, to ensure confidentiality while allowing traceability of statements to specific perspectives. This approach enabled clear linking of empirical evidence to conceptual analysis, enhancing the trustworthiness of the study and providing nuanced insights into how Heritage-Based Education interacts with inclusive practice (Baxter & Jack, 2021).

Curriculum Content and Heritage Affirmation

Document analysis of curriculum materials from the three Chitungwiza primary schools highlighted a pronounced emphasis on specific cultural traditions, predominantly those associated with the Shona ethnic majority. The curriculum dedicates considerable content to teaching traditional music, dance forms such as Mbira, proverbs, and folk tales as core learning areas (Government of Zimbabwe, 2024). For instance, the

curriculum guide explicitly states: *“Children will learn to uphold the values and customs of their ancestors, ensuring the continuation of the community’s heritage”* (Government of Zimbabwe, 2024, p. 32). This clear prioritisation aims to foster a strong sense of cultural identity and continuity.

However, such focus on dominant cultural narratives introduces philosophical concerns about cultural essentialism, which tends to fix cultural identities as homogeneous and unchanging, potentially marginalising minority groups or hybrid identities (Young et al., 2022). This essentialist framing conflicts with contemporary philosophical understandings of culture as fluid and evolving, as argued by Taylor (2021), who stresses that cultural identities are constructed through dynamic social interaction and adaptation. The curriculum’s heavy emphasis on cultural forms raises questions about whose heritage is privileged and whether this approach accommodates the pluralistic realities of Zimbabwean society.

Additionally, the curriculum’s selective representation of cultural heritage reflects broader socio-political dynamics where majority culture often dominates educational content (Chikukwa et al., 2023). Philosophically, this raises epistemic justice concerns as articulated by Fricker (2007), who highlights how exclusion from dominant knowledge frameworks constitutes a form of injustice that silences minority voices. Therefore, the curriculum’s heritage affirmation simultaneously serves as a site of cultural preservation and potential exclusion, revealing inherent tensions between promoting cultural pride and recognising diverse identities within inclusive education.

Inclusion in Practice: Teachers’ and Administrators’ Perspectives

Interviews with the six teachers and three school administrators revealed a nuanced understanding of inclusion within the Heritage-Based Education framework. Most participants defined inclusion largely in terms of equitable access and participation, emphasising the importance of accommodating learners with disabilities, language differences, and varied gender identities (UNESCO, 2020). Participant A1 noted: *“Inclusion means no child should be left behind, whether they have a disability or come from a different cultural background. We try to accommodate everyone.”* This reflects a normative commitment aligned with global education standards.

Despite this commitment, participants reported significant challenges in realising inclusive ideals. Teachers cited language barriers involving those who spoke minority dialects or languages and those who were less

proficient in the official instructional languages, complicating academic participation. Participant T3 explained: *“Sometimes children from minority groups struggle because the lessons focus on dominant cultural practices. We try to translate teaching materials into local languages, but resources are limited.”*

Additionally, teachers acknowledged that disabilities, including those related to physical and learning challenges, were often poorly supported due to a lack of specialist training and materials. Gender disparities also persisted subtly, with Teacher T5 observing: *“Girls sometimes hesitate to participate in discussions about traditional roles, which can reinforce exclusion.”* These real-world constraints demonstrate the gap between inclusive aspirations and classroom realities.

Philosophically, the teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives resonate with Ubuntu’s ethic of community and mutual care, which emphasises inter-connectedness and collective responsibility (Mbigi, 2021). However, Ubuntu’s focus on communal harmony sometimes risks sidelining minority or dissenting identities when community norms are rigidly enforced (Wiredu, 2021). Teacher T1 reflected this tension thus: *“We want everyone to feel part of the class, but sometimes cultural expectations exclude those who are different.”* These insights highlight the ongoing challenge of aligning local cultural values with inclusive education’s universalist emphasis on difference and equality.

Observations on Pedagogical Practices

Classroom observations recorded a mix of inclusive and exclusionary teaching methods. Several teachers showed awareness of student diversity, using differentiated instruction and culturally-responsive teaching to engage learners effectively. One participant was observed sharing heritage stories in a way that encouraged all pupils to talk about their family backgrounds, promoting inclusivity: *“When I tell the story of our ancestors, I invite children to share their family stories too, so everyone sees themselves in the lesson”* (T4). These practices align with inclusive pedagogy, which values learners’ different identities as sources of knowledge and promotes a sense of belonging (Chikukwa et al., 2023).

Conversely, some lessons displayed rigid adherence to dominant cultural content that alienated certain learners. In one instance, a teacher insisted on reciting a Shona proverb unfamiliar to minority pupils, leading to disengagement. T5 reported: *“Several children appeared distracted, whispering to each other, possibly feeling disconnected from the content.”* This illustrates how inflexible cultural content can limit participation and contribute to exclusion. Multicultural education scholars argue for

curricula that balance cultural respect with the recognition of diversity and difference within classrooms (Kymlicka, 2020). These observations expose the pedagogical tension between preserving heritage and embracing learner heterogeneity.

Inclusive Education Theory advocates presenting heritage content as dynamic and open to multiple interpretations, thus enabling diverse learners to relate meaningfully and participate fully (Nussbaum, 2021). When teachers treat heritage as a living tradition responsive to contemporary contexts, it becomes a resource for inclusion rather than exclusion.

The Paradox in Action

The universality, particularity paradox was clear in daily school practices. Heritage based education, by affirming specific cultural identities, can both support and limit the universal goal of inclusion that aims for fair recognition and accommodation of all learners (Rawls, 2020). Participants expressed this tension, with A2 stating: *“We want to celebrate our heritage, but we must be careful not to leave anyone out because of where they come from or their abilities.”* This shows the tricky balance between valuing cultural uniqueness and promoting universal inclusion.

Philosophically, addressing this paradox calls for Critical Pluralism, a framework recognising the legitimacy of multiple cultural perspectives while upholding justice and inclusion as fundamental (Young et al., 2022). Ubuntu philosophy contributes valuable insights into community and relational personhood but requires re-interpretation to incorporate difference and dissent without fracturing communal bonds (Mbigi, 2021). The empirical evidence from classroom observations, teacher interviews, and document analysis suggests that inclusion is not automatically enabled or constrained by heritage content; rather, it is shaped by the curriculum’s flexibility, teachers’ ability to adapt lessons, and the implementation of inclusive pedagogical strategies that respond to learner diversity (Chikukwa et al., 2023; Nussbaum, 2021). This nuanced understanding advances debates on the ethical dimensions of Heritage-Based Education and the imperative of harmonising cultural affirmation with inclusive justice in Zimbabwean primary education.

Discussion: Normative Implications

This section discusses the normative implications of Zimbabwe’s Heritage-Based Education (HBE) policy, critically examining its philosophical foundations and practical effects on inclusion. It integrates

empirical findings and theoretical perspectives to assess how heritage affirmation can both support and constrain equitable participation, highlighting the need for dialogical, pluralistic, and reflective educational practices.

Critique of Current Heritage-Based Education from a Philosophical Perspective

Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Education (HBE) policy, while commendable in its intent to reaffirm cultural identity, faces critical philosophical challenges regarding pluralism and epistemic justice. The curriculum's predominant focus on majority cultural traditions risks excluding minority perspectives and evolving cultural identities, revealing a limited engagement with pluralism (Young, 2022; Taylor, 2021). By privileging a narrow conception of heritage, the policy inadvertently enacts cultural imperialism within ostensibly inclusive frameworks. This dynamic echoes Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, where dominant groups monopolise knowledge production and marginalise alternative epistemologies, thus undermining equitable participation in educational spaces.

Such epistemic closure threatens to ossify cultural narratives rather than foster critical reflection and dialogue. This static approach contradicts contemporary educational theories that advocate heritage as a living, contested, and negotiated practice (Nussbaum, 2021). In the Zimbabwean context, the risk is that the HBE policy, without sufficient pluralistic mechanisms, becomes an instrument of cultural essentialism rather than an emancipatory tool. These concerns invite a deeper philosophical interrogation of the HBE policy's capacity to genuinely foster inclusive education that recognises and values differences beyond mere symbolic representation.

Ubuntu and Inclusive Education

Ubuntu philosophy offers a valuable normative resource for reimagining inclusion within heritage education. Rooted in relational personhood and communal interdependence, Ubuntu emphasises values such as empathy, solidarity, and mutual respect (Mbigi, 2021; Wiredu, 2021). These principles can underpin an ethic of care that supports inclusive education by recognising learners as embedded in social networks that sustain their dignity and development. Unlike individualistic liberal frameworks, Ubuntu foregrounds the community's role in enabling participation and belonging, which aligns with the relational dimension of inclusion.

However, the interpretive flexibility of Ubuntu is crucial. When rigidly construed as demanding conformity to communal norms, Ubuntu risks marginalising dissenting voices and minority identities within the group, thereby replicating exclusionary dynamics under a veneer of harmony (Wiredu, 2021). The challenge, then, lies in deploying Ubuntu not as a prescriptive cultural monolith but as a dynamic framework that embraces difference as integral to community life. Such a re-interpreted Ubuntu can provide an inclusive ethos that balances cultural affirmation with respect for diversity, fostering epistemic justice within educational contexts.

Reconciling Heritage and Inclusion: Normative Proposals

The empirical and philosophical analyses suggest that Heritage-Based Education must evolve into a critical, dialogical, and reflective practice. Critical heritage education involves teaching cultural traditions not as fixed and uncontested truths but as sites of ongoing interpretation and debate (Nussbaum, 2021; Young et al, 2022). This approach promotes epistemic humility and openness, enabling learners from diverse backgrounds to engage meaningfully with heritage content while asserting their own identities.

Recognising internal diversity within cultural groups is vital. Heritage is rarely monolithic; cultural identities encompass multiplicities, tensions, and hybridities that education should acknowledge and explore (Taylor, 2021). Educators are trained to facilitate discussions that expose cultural plurality and contestation, fostering learning environments where differences are recognised, valued, and seen as enriching the educational community.

Furthermore, teachers and school administrators play a pivotal role as facilitators of epistemic justice and inclusive participation. They must cultivate pedagogies that actively challenge dominant narratives, validate marginalised knowledges, and empower all learners to contribute to knowledge construction (Fricker, 2007). This requires capacity-building and resource support to develop culturally-responsive, flexible curricula and inclusive teaching methods that go beyond mere representation to structural transformation.

Such normative shifts align with global calls for education systems that reconcile cultural affirmation with universal human rights, emphasising the importance of integrating inclusive pedagogical frameworks and critical heritage education to foster equitable participation and social justice (Nussbaum, 2021; Young et al., 2022;

Taylor, 2021). This ensures that Heritage-Based Education becomes a catalyst for social justice rather than division. In the Zimbabwean context, this entails fostering a living heritage that sustains communal values while embracing pluralism and inclusion as core educational commitments.

Conclusion

This study has revealed the inherent paradox within Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Education (HBE) policy, where the affirmation of specific cultural heritages enriches learners' identities but simultaneously presents challenges to inclusive education. While the curriculum promotes cultural pride and communal belonging, it can inadvertently reinforce cultural essentialism, marginalising minority voices and limiting the universality of inclusion. This tension reflects a fundamental philosophical dilemma between valuing particular cultural identities and upholding universal ideals of equity and participation. The research confirms that heritage is a critical educational resource capable of fostering a communal ethic rooted in Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasises relationality, empathy, and solidarity. However, for heritage education to be genuinely inclusive, it must transcend rigid or static interpretations that demand conformity. Instead, it requires a dynamic, reflexive engagement with culture that embraces diversity within cultural groups and recognises difference as integral to community life. Balancing heritage affirmation with universal inclusion ensures that cultural identity contributes positively without excluding or silencing others. Policy and practice evolve to embody a more pluralistic and critically-engaged vision of heritage education. This involves expanding curricular content to reflect cultural multiplicity and equipping educators to facilitate epistemic justice through inclusive pedagogies. Such an approach fosters dialogue, reflexivity, and learner agency, promoting equitable participation and upholding both universal human dignity and particular cultural identities.

The philosophical insight of this study underscores the on-going challenge in education to reconcile global norms with local identities. Achieving this balance is essential for creating educational spaces that do not merely tolerate but actively embrace difference, thus enabling all learners to flourish. Heritage-Based Education, when critically-informed and inclusively-practised, can become a powerful catalyst for social justice and human development.

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