

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION: PRECURSOR TO LEADERSHIP TRANSFORMATION IN 21ST-CENTURY AFRICA

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Abstract

Across Africa, the scale of social, economic, and ecological change demands leaders who are ethically grounded, culturally literate, critically reflective, and public-spirited. This paper argues that a robust philosophy of education rooted in African humanism (Ubuntu), decolonial thought, and critical pedagogy should be treated as a strategic lever for leadership transformation, not a purely theoretical exercise. After framing key philosophical traditions and their relevance to contemporary leadership dilemmas, the paper maps practical pathways: curriculum reform (values, languages, and ethics), pedagogy (dialogue and problem-posing), assessment (capabilities and civic outcomes), teacher education (professional judgment and moral agency), and system governance (participation and accountability). The paper closes with implementation priorities aligned to African Union Agenda 2063 and UNESCO's "new social contract for education," proposing indicators that connect educational philosophy to measurable leadership capabilities and development outcomes.

Keywords: Ubuntu, decolonisation, critical pedagogy, educational leadership, Africa, Agenda 2063, capability approach

Introduction

The crises of leadership across Africa whether in governance, education, healthcare, or enterprise are often reduced to questions of technical capacity: lack of infrastructure, weak planning, or inadequate managerial skills. While these issues matter, they do not exhaust the roots of leadership failure. At a deeper level, the questions are philosophical: *What is the purpose of education in African societies? What kind of human being and citizen should schooling seek to cultivate? Which forms of knowledge are legitimate, in which languages, and in service of whose interests?* These are not merely policy or administrative issues but questions of meaning, values, and orientation (Nyerere, 1968; Dewey, 1916/2012; Freire, 2000). When philosophy of education is treated as foundational, education systems are guided not only by pragmatic demands of employability or technical efficiency but also by ethical and civic imperatives (Chingombe & Major, 2024). This foundation helps to shape the kind of leadership that Africa urgently needs in the 21st century: leadership that is ethical rather than corrupt, community-centered rather than individualistic, dialogical rather than authoritarian, innovative rather than stagnant, and accountable rather than self-serving (UNESCO, 2021; African Union Commission, 2015). In this sense, philosophy of education is not an abstract pursuit but a practical compass for leadership transformation. It enables African nations to interrogate their educational priorities, align them with cultural values such as Ubuntu, and orient them toward continental aspirations like Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals (Nephitaly & Olateju, 2025).

Philosophical Pillars for Leadership Transformation

1. Ubuntu Humanism

Ubuntu, expressed in the maxim “*I am because we are*”, offers one of Africa’s most profound philosophical contributions to leadership and education. It defines personhood not as an individual possession but as a relational and moral achievement, grounded in dignity, reciprocity, solidarity, and restorative justice (Letseka, 2012; Ramose, 2002). For leadership, Ubuntu challenges the dominant model of the leader as a heroic or authoritarian figure and reframes leadership as custodianship of communal flourishing. In education, Ubuntu informs both policy and pedagogy. It shifts the purpose of schooling from producing competitive individuals for the labor market to nurturing responsible citizens who embody care, cooperation, and ethical responsibility. This has direct implications for how school culture is cultivated, how teacher professionalism is understood, and how student character formation is prioritized in nation-building (Nyahunzvi, 2023). In the context of governance, Ubuntu humanism resists corruption, nepotism, and exploitation by grounding leadership legitimacy in service to others. Thus, Ubuntu is not just a moral proverb but a framework for transforming African leadership into a practice rooted in collective dignity and shared accountability.

2. Decolonizing Knowledge and Language

Another central philosophical pillar for leadership transformation is the decolonization of knowledge and language. Colonial educational legacies privileged European epistemologies

and marginalized African intellectual traditions. Decolonial thought calls for a critical interrogation of these hierarchies and the linguistic injustices that underpin them. Wiredu (1996) argues for “conceptual decolonization,” which means engaging in cross-cultural dialogue that recognizes universal human concerns while refusing to erase African conceptual schemes. This approach insists that leadership in education cannot be authentic if it uncritically reproduces imported categories that alienate learners from their cultural identities. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) further emphasizes the role of language in shaping consciousness, agency, and identity. For him, language is not merely a tool of communication but a carrier of culture. Leadership in African education must therefore grapple with language policies that continue to privilege colonial languages, thereby dislocating African learners from their epistemic roots. To ignore this dimension is to perpetuate forms of dependency and intellectual subordination. Contemporary scholarship extends these insights into the digital and technological age. Bekele and Ofoyuru (2023), for example, demonstrate how African philosophies such as Ubuntu and *Asabiyya* (a principle of social solidarity) can guide ethical technology integration in higher education. By situating digital transformation within indigenous value systems, African education can form leaders who are both globally competent and culturally grounded. In this way, decolonizing knowledge and language is not about rejecting modernity but about ensuring that educational leadership is oriented toward inclusivity, authenticity, and epistemic justice.

3. Critical Pedagogy for Agency

Critical pedagogy, as pioneered by Paulo Freire, critiques the “banking” model of education where learners passively receive information. Instead, it emphasizes dialogue, reflection, and problem-posing as pathways to genuine empowerment (Freire, 1970/2018). Within African contexts, where colonial legacies often produced hierarchical and authoritarian schooling, critical pedagogy opens possibilities for education as liberation rather than domination. For leadership development, this means cultivating leaders who are not merely compliant technocrats but reflective practitioners capable of interrogating structural injustice whether in governance, economic systems, or knowledge hierarchies. Leaders shaped by critical pedagogy can recognize oppression, engage communities in deliberation, and mobilize grassroots action toward transformation. In practical terms, this approach redefines the African classroom: instead of rote memorization, teachers employ participatory methods such as case studies, simulations, service learning, and community-based research. For example, learners in a rural secondary school might study environmental degradation not only through textbooks but by investigating local deforestation, dialoguing with elders, and proposing community-driven solutions. As Waghid (2022) emphasizes, “activist pedagogy” in African universities can cultivate dignity, responsibility, and care qualities indispensable for future leaders navigating ethical dilemmas in governance, entrepreneurship, or diplomacy. Thus, critical pedagogy becomes both a philosophy of education and a method of leadership formation

4. African Communitarian Personhood

John Mbiti’s (1969) statement “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am” encapsulates a communitarian ontology where the individual’s existence and identity are

deeply embedded in the life of the community. In contrast to Western individualism, which often prizes autonomy and competition, African communitarian philosophy emphasizes interdependence, collective responsibility, and mutual flourishing. Applied to leadership, this philosophy shifts the focus from individual charisma or achievement toward relational capabilities. Skills such as care, accountability, hospitality, empathy, and consensus-building are not “soft” or secondary qualities but foundational pillars of effective leadership. A leader who cannot listen, reconcile, or foster trust undermines the very communal fabric that sustains governance.

Education systems, therefore, must intentionally nurture communitarian values alongside cognitive and technical competencies. For instance, civic education programs can integrate communal ethics into leadership training, while school governance structures can model participatory decision-making. Such practices cultivate leaders who view power not as domination but as stewardship of communal wellbeing. Chingombe and Major (2024), argue that communitarian frameworks can enrich global leadership competency models by embedding African relational ethics into curricula and training programs. In this sense, communitarian personhood complements modern management theories while grounding them in African realities.

The Leadership Challenge: Why Philosophy Comes First

Africa’s education crisis often measured through conventional metrics like literacy and numeracy remains one of the continent’s most pressing concerns. Recent reports reveal that nine out of ten children in Sub-Saharan Africa cannot read and understand a simple text by the age of ten (World Bank, 2024; UNICEF, 2024). This “learning poverty” represents more than a shortfall in academic outcomes; it signifies a blockage in the very pipeline through which future leaders are cultivated. Foundational literacy and numeracy are not merely academic competencies but the essential prerequisites for higher-order reasoning, effective communication, and informed decision-making skills indispensable for leadership in any domain. Yet, the leadership challenge in Africa extends far deeper than technical skill gaps. Contemporary societies across the continent are confronted with complex and overlapping crises: climate change, which threatens food systems and rural livelihoods; rapid urbanization, which produces megacities alongside informal settlements; fragile governance and political instability, which erode public trust; mounting public debt, which restricts investment in human capital; and the ethical dilemmas posed by artificial intelligence and digital technologies, which demand a moral compass to balance innovation with equity. Addressing these challenges cannot rely on technical expertise alone. It requires leaders who are capable of ethical deliberation, critical reasoning, and collective action. These qualities are not developed through rote instruction or exam-driven schooling; they are philosophical dispositions habits of ethical reflection, civic responsibility, and dialogical engagement that must be deliberately cultivated through education.

This is precisely why philosophy of education must come first. Without a clear and guiding vision of the kind of human being and citizen that schools are designed to nurture, reforms in curriculum, finance, or infrastructure risk becoming fragmented and misaligned. For example, a curriculum reform that emphasizes STEM without embedding ethical reasoning may produce technically skilled graduates who lack the moral capacity to address issues like climate justice or digital surveillance. Similarly, increased school funding without a clear philosophical grounding may expand access without ensuring that what is taught serves the broader goals of justice, peace, and sustainability. Philosophy provides the compass, while policy provides the map. UNESCO (2021), in its report *Reimagining Our Futures Together*, insists that education systems should not only prepare learners for economic growth but also orient them towards justice, ecological sustainability, democratic participation, and peace. This aligns with African philosophical traditions that emphasize communal well-being and moral responsibility. For instance, Ubuntu ethics summarized in the phrase “*I am because we are*” offers a relational view of leadership that privileges solidarity, compassion, and dignity over individual ambition. Likewise, Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, when adapted to African contexts, fosters dialogical agency, enabling learners to question unjust systems rather than passively conform to them.

Contemporary African scholars such as Nephitaly and Olateju (2025) reinforce this argument by asserting that leadership renewal on the continent depends on integrating ethical and philosophical reflection into educational policy and practice. They argue that leadership devoid of ethical grounding risks perpetuating cycles of corruption, inequality, and authoritarianism. Conversely, leaders educated through a philosophy-driven curriculum are more likely to embody accountability, inclusivity, and visionary thinking. In short, Africa’s leadership crisis is not only a matter of weak governance but also a philosophical failure of education, a neglect of Ubuntu values, ethical reflection, and critical pedagogy in the formation of leaders. Without reclaiming philosophy as the foundation of education, the continent risks producing generations of technically competent individuals who lack the moral courage and civic imagination required to navigate the challenges of the 21st century (Obizue, Enomah & Onyebu, 2025)..

From philosophy to design: pathways for systems and schools

1. Curriculum: values, languages, and ethics

A philosophically grounded curriculum must go beyond transmitting technical knowledge to intentionally shaping ethical, civic, and cultural capacities.

- Embed Ubuntu ethics across subjects: Ubuntu’s emphasis on justice, care, hospitality, solidarity, and stewardship can be infused into all disciplines. For example, mathematics classes could incorporate social justice data projects, while literature could foreground themes of empathy, reconciliation, and responsibility (Letseka, 2012; Nyahunzvi, 2023). Such approaches ensure that ethical reflection is not confined to “civic education” but becomes a cross-cutting dimension of schooling.

- Multilingual policies for comprehension and identity: Preserving and promoting African languages alongside colonial languages (English, French, Portuguese) is critical for deep learning and identity affirmation. Ngũgĩ (1986) argued that language carries culture, and without it, learners risk alienation from their own worldview. Multilingualism expands inclusivity and strengthens cognitive flexibility while connecting curriculum to lived community realities.
- Civic-public problem sets: Curriculum should move away from abstract, decontextualized content toward community-relevant learning modules. Students can investigate issues like clean water access, public health, local budgeting, or land disputes framing these as interdisciplinary inquiries that demand negotiation, evidence gathering, and collective decision-making (Freire, 1970/2018). This equips learners with the skills and dispositions for participatory citizenship.

2 Pedagogy: dialogic, experiential, and community-based

Pedagogical reform is where philosophical commitments come alive in practice. A move away from rote memorization toward dialogic and experiential methods can cultivate leaders who think critically and act responsibly.

- Dialogue circles and structured controversy: Instead of teacher-dominated recitation, classrooms can adopt Socratic dialogue, debates, and structured controversies that encourage learners to justify positions, engage counterarguments, and work toward consensus. These methods nurture deliberative skills essential for leadership (Freire, 1970/2018; Waghid, 2022).
- Service-learning and capstones with local stakeholders: Experiential projects can be designed in partnership with local councils, NGOs, or startups. For instance, final-year students might co-develop a waste management plan for their community, or a digital literacy campaign for elders. Such service-learning ensures knowledge is connected to public value and prepares graduates for leadership beyond academic success (Akomas, 202x).
- Teacher as facilitator, student as agent: Critical pedagogy insists on teachers as facilitators rather than authoritarian transmitters. Assessment should move beyond correctness of answers to include argument quality, ethical reasoning, and reflective judgment. This aligns with the goal of producing graduates who can engage uncertainty, balance competing values, and innovate in public problem-solving.

3. Assessment: From Recall to Capability

Traditional education systems in Africa have relied heavily on rote memorization and high-stakes examinations as the dominant mode of assessment. While these methods provide a measure of content retention, they fall short in evaluating learners' readiness for leadership, ethical decision-making, and civic engagement in the 21st century. To bridge this gap, assessments must transition from recall-based evaluations to capability-oriented approaches.

For instance, performance tasks such as drafting policy briefs, creating citizen charters, or conducting community audits can develop students' problem-solving, negotiation, and communication skills hallmarks of transformative leadership (Chingombe & Major, 2024). Similarly, portfolios allow learners to document their growth across multiple domains, including critical thinking, collaboration, and moral reasoning, while public defenses of projects foster accountability, confidence, and persuasive reasoning. Equally important is the tracking of relational and civic outcomes for example, learners' ability to mediate disputes, participate in democratic deliberation, or demonstrate empathy in community service. These outcomes act as leading indicators of leadership capacity, positioning assessment not just as a measurement tool but as a formative process for leadership cultivation (Brookings, 2025; Chingombe & Major, 2024).

4. Teacher Education: Moral Agency and Professional Judgment

Teachers are central agents in translating philosophy of education into practice. However, many African teacher education programs still prioritize content mastery over ethical and dialogic competencies. A transformed philosophy of education must reframe teachers as “ethics-in-practice professionals” individuals who embody moral agency and are equipped to mediate values conflicts in diverse classroom settings (Waghid, 2022). This transformation requires integrating moral philosophy, ethics, and civic engagement into teacher training curricula, ensuring that teachers can model the reflective and participatory leadership they are expected to cultivate in students. Institutionalizing collaborative practices such as lesson study, peer coaching, and reflective dialogue circles can further strengthen teachers' professional judgment, encouraging them to see themselves as leaders rather than mere transmitters of knowledge (Nyahunzvi, 2023). Moreover, embedding community-based practicum experiences where teachers-in-training work with local organizations, NGOs, and civic bodies ensures that teacher education aligns with real-world leadership challenges. This positions teachers not just as educators, but as facilitators of social transformation.

5. System Governance: Participation and Accountability

A philosophy of education that seeks to transform leadership in 21st-century Africa must be embedded within the broader governance of education systems. Current governance structures often reproduce hierarchical decision-making and exclude learners and communities from meaningful participation. To counter this, schools and ministries should adopt participatory governance models that emphasize shared responsibility, transparency, and accountability. For example, school governance bodies such as boards, councils, and learner parliaments should deliberate using transparent agendas and inclusive processes. This allows students to practice procedural justice learning firsthand the importance of fairness, negotiation, and accountability in leadership (Letseka, 2012). At the systemic level, governments, ministries of education, teacher unions, community associations, and youth groups can co-create “public value compacts” policy frameworks that blend learning outcomes with civic and ethical outcomes. These compacts would align with UNESCO's (2021) call for a new social contract for education, which emphasizes education's role in shaping just, peaceful, and sustainable futures.

Recent policy discussions underscore that such compacts are not merely aspirational; they are pragmatic pathways to rebuilding trust in public institutions while preparing a generation of leaders equipped to handle Africa's unique developmental challenges (Brookings, 2025). By embedding participation and accountability into governance, education systems become living laboratories of democratic practice, reinforcing the philosophical foundations of leadership transformation.

Case-Anchored Illustrations

1. Tanzania's "Education for Self-Reliance" (Nyerere, 1967)

Julius Nyerere's policy of *Education for Self-Reliance* remains one of the most influential philosophies of African education. Though situated in the post-independence era, it emphasized the integration of education with community life and production. Students were not only expected to acquire knowledge but also to apply learning in ways that contributed to local development and civic responsibility. Today, this model is still relevant because it shows how curricula can be aligned with real-life challenges such as food security, entrepreneurship, and citizenship training. Modern adaptations could integrate digital literacy and sustainability education while retaining the core principle of linking schools to their surrounding communities.

2. South Africa's restorative practices influenced by Ubuntu ethics (Letseka, 2012)

In South Africa, Ubuntu has inspired approaches to discipline and moral formation in schools, particularly through *restorative conferencing*. Instead of punitive systems that alienate learners, restorative practices focus on repairing harm, reintegrating offenders, and strengthening communal bonds. This model demonstrates that moral education and conflict resolution can co-exist with academic excellence and high expectations. It offers a replicable framework for other African contexts where schools often struggle with discipline, violence, and exclusion. Embedding Ubuntu in such restorative strategies cultivates empathy, mutual respect, and responsibility, critical values for democratic citizenship.

3. Teach For All's Ubuntu leadership model (Nyahunzvi, 2023)

Contemporary global initiatives such as *Teach For All* have explicitly drawn from Ubuntu in their leadership development programs. This model seeks to cultivate leaders who are not narrowly self-serving but oriented toward the collective well-being of their communities. For example, Ubuntu-informed leadership training emphasizes empathy, collaboration, and the pursuit of social justice. By prioritizing communal flourishing over individual gain, the model bridges African indigenous philosophy with global educational leadership practices. It also demonstrates that Ubuntu is not only a cultural heritage but a living framework adaptable to modern educational reforms.

Implementation Priorities

- **Adopt national philosophy statements naming Ubuntu, decoloniality, and democratic citizenship (Chingombe & Major, 2024).**

Governments across Africa should move beyond fragmented policy interventions by drafting and adopting explicit national philosophy statements that anchor education systems in values of Ubuntu, decoloniality, and democratic citizenship. Such guiding documents would not only symbolically acknowledge African cultural and philosophical roots but also serve as reference points for curriculum development, pedagogy, assessment, and leadership training. By institutionalizing Ubuntu's communal ethics, the decolonial imperative of intellectual sovereignty, and democratic ideals of participation, governments would be able to align schools with broader national development visions. These statements could be integrated into teacher professional standards, school inspection frameworks, and leadership evaluations, ensuring that philosophy translates into lived practice.

- **Language-in-education reform (Ngũgĩ, 1986).**

Language remains a decisive factor in educational inclusion and justice. As Ngũgĩ argued, the continued dominance of colonial languages perpetuates alienation and hinders authentic knowledge construction. Reforming language-in-education policies to prioritize mother-tongue and African languages as mediums of instruction would not only strengthen comprehension but also affirm learners' cultural identities and expand civic participation. Evidence shows that children learn faster and retain more when taught in languages they speak at home, creating a strong foundation for literacy and critical thinking. In practice, this would require developing localized textbooks, training teachers in bilingual pedagogy, and creating gradual transition models where students acquire global languages without displacing their own. Such reforms would foster epistemic justice and reposition African education as both globally competitive and locally meaningful.

- **Leadership labs in universities to link theory with civic practice (Bekele & Ofoyuru, 2023).**

The gap between academic training and societal leadership demands can be bridged through the establishment of leadership laboratories in universities and teacher colleges. These labs would operate as innovation hubs where students experiment with participatory governance, engage with communities, and co-design solutions for pressing social challenges such as climate resilience, unemployment, and gender equity. By simulating real-world civic contexts, leadership labs would encourage experiential learning and reflective practice, equipping future leaders with practical competencies in negotiation, conflict resolution, ethical decision-making, and collaborative governance. Moreover, partnerships with civil society organizations, local governments, and private enterprises could enhance the impact of these labs, making them pipelines for socially accountable leadership across Africa.

- **Ethics and public-reason modules for all teachers and leaders (Waghid, 2022)**

Teaching and leadership in African contexts cannot be reduced to technical delivery of content; they are inherently moral practices. Embedding ethics and public-reason modules in teacher education and leadership programs would prepare educators for the ethical dilemmas and responsibilities inherent in shaping future citizens. Waghid's call for cultivating deliberative, dialogical spaces in education highlights the need for teachers to be facilitators of democratic engagement. Ethics courses would cover themes such as equity, justice, inclusivity, and professional integrity, while public-reason training would equip teachers and leaders to mediate diverse viewpoints, encourage respectful dialogue, and resist authoritarian tendencies. This reform would elevate teaching from a mere profession to a vocation grounded in civic responsibility.

- **Measure what matters: civic engagement, trust, and leadership readiness (World Bank, 2022, 2024).**

Education systems are too often evaluated on narrow metrics like literacy and numeracy test scores, which, while important, overlook broader social goals. The World Bank has increasingly emphasized the need to “measure what matters” including civic trust, social cohesion, and leadership readiness. This shift calls for developing new assessment tools that capture indicators of civic responsibility, community participation, and ethical leadership capacity. For instance, schools could track students' involvement in community service, debate clubs, democratic simulations, and collaborative projects as part of educational outcomes. At the national level, longitudinal studies could measure how education contributes to civic trust and democratic stability. Such a paradigm shift would realign accountability systems with Africa's developmental priorities, ensuring that education is a driver of nation-building and peace rather than merely credentialing.

- **Coalitions for foundational learning blending literacy with civic learning (Piper & Dubeck, 2024; UNICEF, 2024).**

Foundational literacy and numeracy have become global priorities, but African contexts require an expanded conception that also integrates civic competencies. Multi-stakeholder coalitions linking governments, NGOs, community-based organizations, and international development partners should promote a model of foundational learning that blends basic academic skills with civic literacy. This means that from early childhood, learners are not only taught how to read and calculate but also how to collaborate, deliberate, respect diversity, and engage with civic life. UNICEF's 2024 frameworks emphasize the interdependence of academic and civic foundations, arguing that sustainable education must nurture both intellectual and social capacities. Coalitions can help mobilize resources, standardize curricula, and ensure accountability across multiple actors, thereby embedding civic learning as a central component of educational equity and transformation.

Conclusion

The future of African leadership is not a distant prospect it is already being shaped in the present, within the everyday practices of classrooms, schools, and education systems. Leadership formation does not begin when individuals assume positions of authority; rather, it is cultivated in lesson plans, language policies, teacher preparation programs, and school governance routines. The values and priorities embedded in these spaces will determine the type of leaders Africa produces for the coming decades. When education systems are anchored in a clear and coherent philosophy, leadership development becomes intentional rather than accidental. Ubuntu, with its emphasis on communal dignity and interdependence, provides an ethical foundation that ensures leaders view themselves as servants of the community rather than mere power holders. Wiredu's critical universalism reminds us that leadership must be guided by both African values and globally relevant rationality, enabling leaders to navigate local realities while engaging meaningfully in a globalized world. Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's insistence on linguistic justice underscores that leadership must grow from cultural authenticity, as language is a carrier of identity, values, and agency.

Added to these, Freire's principle of dialogical agency situates leadership in practices of mutual respect, critical questioning, and emancipatory dialogue qualities necessary for societies that aim to break free from authoritarian and exclusionary patterns. Contemporary African scholars like Waghid and Chingombe further emphasize the cultivation of democratic citizenship, ethical responsibility, and civic imagination as core to leadership formation. Together, these philosophical streams point toward a holistic vision of leadership that is morally anchored, critically engaged, and socially responsive. The task for African education, therefore, is not merely to transmit knowledge but to deliberately nurture leadership at scale through curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and policy. If cultivated with intentionality, African education can produce leaders who are both morally grounded and developmentally visionary, capable of meeting the ethical and socio-economic challenges of the 21st century. In this sense, leadership is not left to chance; it becomes the outcome of deliberate design, rooted in African intellectual traditions yet dynamically open to global dialogue.

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