

TOWARDS AFRICANIZING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDG) 4: SCHOOL LEADERSHIP REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

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Abstract

The outcry for quality education for all remains an issue almost three decades later in a democratic South Africa, demeaning the youth of 1976 who fought in response to the general poor-quality Bantu education offered to Black South African learners. The authors of this paper engaged in an ongoing discussion with six township school principals about quality education and what it might look like for the South African context over the period of one year. These discussions were in response to the alarming statistics of unemployment, increasing poverty and inequality, and the concurrent “hopelessness” plaguing youth. A qualitative case study research approach within an interpretive paradigm was adopted, as it is well-suited to generating in-depth, contextual, and holistic understandings of school principals’ perspectives through focus group discussions, reflections, and observations. Thematic analysis generated findings that describe quality education as education for lifelong learning, differentiated and offering possible futures, nurturing enterprise, creativity, and innovation, and offering innovative and third-space learning environments, and, finally, an education system that restores hope and agency amongst learners and teachers. In addition, systemic inhibitors that hinder the attainment of quality education were identified. The paper concludes that education for a sustainable future should be inclusive, adaptable, flexible, and integrated so that learners can be prepared for future worlds. This paper contributes to ongoing debates about Africanizing the SDGs, specifically SDG 4, and what education for a sustainable future could look like in the African context.

Keywords: SDG 4; *Quality Education, Lifelong Learning, 21st century skills, Education for Sustainable Futures, Ubuntu*

Introduction

Youth Day (June 16) in South Africa commemorates the Soweto uprising during apartheid, when South African youth began a protest march against the then-Bantu Education system. While these protests were sparked by the imposition of Afrikaans as the language of learning in South African schools, they were really to protest the inferior and poor-quality Bantu education offered to Black South African learners. Almost three decades later, in a democratic South Africa, Youth Day is celebrated together with International Day of the African Child each year. To this end, Sibanda (2021) writes, “there is a plethora of reports detailing the suffering of South African children, yet we commemorate their struggle without fear each year with no significant change in their

lives.” The real tragedy, as Nicholson and Simelane (2021) reflect, is “...to be young, gifted, black and still left behind.”

It is against this backdrop that the authors of this paper and six Tshwane school principals involved in a project entitled “Leading Education for Sustainable Futures” engaged in a discussion about quality education (SDG 4) and what it might look like in the South African context. These discussions were in response to the alarming statistics of unemployment, increasing poverty and inequality, and the concurrent “hopelessness” plaguing South African youth. These concerns highlighted the need to reflect on the current narrow outcomes of education and to adopt a broader, more inclusive, normative approach that focuses on capabilities (Sen, 1993). Therefore, if poverty is understood as capability-deprivation, it is necessary to emphasize that functional capabilities are construed in terms of the substantive freedoms people have reason to value, rather than in terms of utility or access to resources (Sen, 1993). It was this shift in purpose that opened the door to discussions about the future and how these school leaders envisaged sustainable education in the service of learner life success, rather than only school success.

Education for Sustainable Futures

One of the major goals of education at any level is to shape the thinking and behavior of its recipients and prepare them for future tasks. Education is also a process of change that is expected to inculcate in learners the skills and capabilities needed to become productive and responsible members of society. Self-reliance, self-empowerment, and agency are qualities that education should foster, as learners represent the future workforce and future leadership of any country. As part of co-creating a common understanding of education for sustainable futures (EfSF) in a previous engagement, the school principals in this study collectively defined it as: “Life-long learning that is resilient, adaptive, and critical with a capacity to problem solve and innovate towards embracing a learning ecosystem that motivates all education stakeholders for future possibilities.” Such a definition views EfSF as a continuous, lifelong learning process that develops competencies enabling recipients to be adaptive, resilient, and innovative, thereby opening pathways to future possibilities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a global acute awareness of the need for readiness for an uncertain future emerged, including in South Africa. During this time, food insecurity was a key challenge affecting learners, along with the digital divide. During this time, schools (including the six schools in this study) had to supplement the food nutrition scheme and support not only learners but also poor households in the communities they served. To supplement the scheme, school food gardens were established, with school and community members collaborating to grow food for the community. It was during this time that the blurred lines between school and community were erased, sparking discussion of “sustainable education” and why it should empower learners (at the very least) with skills that ensure their basic needs, such as feeding themselves, are met.

E.B. Castle (1961), in his books “Ancient Education and Today” and “Principles of Education for African Teachers,” offers insights into education as life-long learning from an African perspective. He defined education as everything that happens to a person from

birth to death. His definition views education as learning that goes beyond the four walls of the classroom, and it includes third spaces of learning (Castle, 1961). As Castle (1961) and later many others (Mbembe, 2016; Fataar, 2023, etc.) elaborate, the decolonization of education is a key imperative in countries like South Africa, where indigenous knowledge frameworks have been excluded. In this regard, Uleanya and Yassim (2024) argue that Africanising the SDGs would be the conduit to achieving the SDGs on the continent.

In light of these conversations, the six Tshwane school principals participating in this study were offered a prompt, which they individually responded to before engaging in a focused discussion.

Research Prompt

If you were able to change the current education offered to your learners towards the kind that supported their success no matter how long they remained at school, describe what quality education would look like for your learners.

This prompt offers the most important focus and is central to the discussion that follows. Rephrased as an aim, this study sought to explore school principal perspectives of what quality education would be for learner life success. To situate this aim within the current body of literature, the following section elaborates on conceptions of “education as a common good” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2015), “quality”, “ideal”, and “responsive” education.

Literature Review

Education as Common Good

In line with much of the decolonization debates, UNESCO (2015, p.8) proposes a rethinking of the purpose of education with a link between the objectives of sustainable development and “global common good.” It suggests that the educative modality should be a humanistic pedagogy and that education itself is a global common good. They also offer a new purpose for education by defining it as “Education must be about learning to live on a planet under pressure.” (UNESCO, 2015, p.3). Education must therefore be oriented not only towards enculturation and adaptation but also towards transformation. With this reorientation of the purpose of education, unfortunately, there is a lack of “in-depth guidance on what exactly is meant by the relevance of education as a common good” (Lotz-Sisitka, 2017, p.66). In rethinking education through the lenses of a humanizing pedagogy (as suggested by UNESCO, 2015, p. 10), “respect for life, human dignity, equal rights, social justice, cultural diversity and a shared responsibility for a sustainable future” are viewed as fundamentals for our common humanity. This suggests that a more expansive approach to education, as offered by Engeström (1987 & 2007) and Engeström and Sannino (2010 & 2016), is needed. The relation of education to human agency, knowledge, learning, and change in ways that take more-than-the-human into account.

As Lotz-Sistika (2017) concludes, expansive learning opportunities that are oriented towards the common good can influence complex chains of human activities (Engeström & Sannino, 2016), not in the direction of a few having all, as in 20th-century education, but in the direction of more being shared more equitably and sustainably. To step into dialogue, education as a common good requires educators to engage critically and imaginatively with the proposed intersection of sustainability, the global common good, the humanistic orientation, and the more-than-human world. It is to this conclusion of Lotz-Sisitka (2017) and to her call for “sustainability in education” that this article seeks to contribute, where school food gardens offer a common activity for rethinking education and where the conception of quality education (as suggested by SDG 4) is a form of “learning activism” (as described by Choudry, 2015).

Quality Education

In a think piece that offers conceptions of quality education from a sustainability perspective, Lotz-Sistika (2013, p.26) reflects on the quality and relevance of education through a technical analysis of the supply–demand relationships by asking pertinent questions like, “Is education relevant to the economy? Are we producing enough graduates for the job market? Do we have enough science and technology graduates?” Such questions are vital for the inclusion of all economically and in attaining a sustainable livelihood.

In South Africa, there is noticeable neglect of teacher education in vocational education and training, and few teachers are oriented in teacher education programs to address education issues relevant to the economy. Hence, educators tend to have a narrow view of education as the system struggles with vestiges of a colonized curriculum, pedagogical approaches that do not connect with learners' lifeworlds, and content that is decontextualized and disconnected from local history, experience, culture, and aspirations. There have been two dominant quality education discourses, namely: (1) education as efficiency/mastery and (2) education as inclusion. A third discourse is needed, one that favors the sociocultural aspects of learning (Lotz-Sisitka, 2011; 2013).

The first discourse on educational quality was introduced into African education by colonialism, favored by those with economic interests in education. The second conception, focusing on inclusion, has its roots in democracy, with greater equity in access and participation (Unterhalter, 2007). The roots of this second-quality discourse are also not found in African society. Hence, there is a need to inquire into how educators and education leaders (as well as parents and learners) view educational quality in South African school contexts. This paper aims to contribute to sociocultural discourses on quality education that conceive of inclusion as a form of quality. Lotz-Sisitka (2011) referred to this as “learning as connection” to express the relationship between meaning-making, context, and concept. For a reorientation of EfSF, educational practices that are more oriented towards understanding the role of education in creating more sustainable, equitable, and just societies will strengthen life skills, citizenship, and, in turn, educational quality. Hence, the demand for sustainability as a new purpose of education requires intensified efforts to address the socio-emotional and affective dimensions of learning beyond a cognitive focus. Hopkins et al. (2020) noted that present and future challenges

require different approaches to education, as this kind of education is expected to prepare learners for the world as it exists while simultaneously preparing them for a future world. Hence, it should support visions of multiple futures that will position human survival within planetary boundaries, decrease disparities, and care for "the other." To achieve this, there would be a need for radical changes in what is referred to as quality education. In this regard, African perspectives, as suggested by the third discourse on describing quality education, recognize the structural characteristics of what has been termed "ideal education."

Allmendinger (2016) recently identified characteristics of an ideal education as inclusive, broad, adaptable, and interconnected. Each of these is described below.

For Allmendinger (2016), a good education system is open to all individuals at no charge, helping them fully realize their unique potential. This means that education should be accessible to children from all socioeconomic backgrounds and their place of residence, their parents' countries of origin, and whether or not they have physical or mental disabilities, should be irrelevant. The goal is to provide equal access to education and actively support them in making the most of their potential.

In addition, a good education system is characterised by broad curricula, which prepare learners for life in all of its diversity and breadth. Of course, education is also about enabling individuals to enter the workforce and thus lead a materially autonomous life. Ideal education empowers people to take control of their lives and to be active participants in society and its political processes (Allmendinger, 2016).

Furthermore, a good education system can change and evolve, integrating new societal developments and actively contributing to them (Mbembe, 2016).

Moreover, education is not limited to schools and vocational training sites; family, friends, sports clubs, youth groups, and the media also provide important learning environments (Siedentop & Van der Mars, 2022).

Finally, a good education system is also marked by transparent structures and a valid method for measuring and documenting educational outcomes, ensuring that certificates retain their meaning and continue to serve as indicators for placing individuals in social position (Swart et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework: Ubuntu philosophy

Ubuntu is a Southern African philosophy that is underpinned by values of interconnectedness, compassion and empathy, respect, dignity, cooperation over competition, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The term Ubuntu originates from the Nguni Bantu languages of Southern Africa and encompasses a humanist philosophy centered on interconnectedness, compassion, and humanity. The philosophy core tenet is the phrase "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (Zulu), which translates to "A person is a person through other people", or "I am because we are". Ukpokodu (2016) posits that Ubuntu, as a philosophical approach, has the potential to preserve indigenous knowledge systems and practices among students and to restore their identities. Mbigi (1997) argues that

because Ubuntu is grounded in humanist values and principles of solidarity, kindness, cooperation, and compassion, when embraced correctly, it can promote and nurture communal living, existence, and interdependence, especially in communal settings.

The case for Ubuntu in African epistemologies has been advanced by Mucina (2013), who argues that many African institutions continue to operate from a Western, Eurocentric perspective, which undermines and dismisses indigenous philosophies such as Ubuntu, regarding them as holding false assumptions and as simply illegitimate African thinking. This could be the main reason why Ubuntu and other African philosophies have not permeated education systems and curricula in many African countries, especially South Africa (Mucina, 2013; Maphalala, 2017).

Ubuntu can then be considered as a pedagogy. As Blackwood (2018, p.30) asserts, Ubuntu can be considered as a “humanizing approach to teaching and engaging students in the learning process”. Thus, teachers who can embrace an Ubuntu pedagogy can create a learning atmosphere that can “affirm, validate and treat students as dignified human beings regardless of their race or class” (Ukpokodu, 2016, p. 155). Ukpokodu (2016) explains that central to the Ubuntu pedagogy is the recognition that all learners, irrespective of their racial, educational, economic, and linguistic backgrounds and sexual orientations, are human beings who can excel in their learning when humanity is positioned at the forefront of their teaching and learning. Ngubane and Makua (2021) assert that Ubuntu pedagogy can treat learners as significant others who bring unique backgrounds, experiences, and prior knowledge for teachers to build on in developing new knowledge. The essence of Ubuntu philosophy, then, as applied to education and as a pedagogy, lies in the recognition of equal partnerships between the teachers and students as co-creators of knowledge (Ngubane & Makua, 2021).

Methodology

A qualitative case study design was adopted within an interpretive paradigm to enable the generation of in-depth, textual, and holistic data from a naturalistic setting (Cohen et al., 2018). This paradigm acknowledges that each research participants in the six purposively chosen schools may have a different interpretation of their work world. Therefore, this would provide a nuanced and contextual perspective on the principals' views of what counts as ideal education. Both purposive and convenience sampling were used to identify the six schools that had been part of a larger project aimed at expanding education for sustainable futures. The profiles of the schools and their principals are tabulated below. We developed *pseudonyms*, as shown in Table 1 below, to conceal the identity of schools and participants.

SCHOOL	PRINCIPAL	QUINTILE	YRS OF EXP. AS PRINCIPAL	AGE	HIGHEST EDUCATION	MAIN SOCIAL ISSUES
P1 Primary School	P1	2	3-5 years	40-50 years	Bachelor's Degree	Unemployment Poverty Crime
P2 Primary School	P2	3	>10 years	40-50 years	Honours Degree	Unemployment Food Insecurity Crime Informal settlement (no proper housing)
P3 Secondary School	P3	2	0-2 years	>50 years	Master's Degree	Unemployment Poverty Crime
P4 Primary School	P4	3	>10 years	>50 years	Honours Degree	Unemployment Poverty Crime Child-Headed Households
P5 Primary School	P5	1	5-10 years	>50 years	Honours Degree	Unemployment Poverty Crime HIV AIDS and other diseases
P6 Primary School	P6	3	0-2 years	30-40 years	Honours Degree	Unemployment Poverty Crime Food insecurity

Data were gathered from the principals through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The research prompt for this study was offered as a think piece to the principals. They were required to write notes first as a response to the prompt before sharing their individual

responses and inviting comments, critiques, or further conversation. The notes, individual responses, and the ensuing discussion formed the corpus of data reported in this paper. The data obtained was then transcribed and analyzed thematically.

Findings

Our thematic analysis yielded five themes, the first being innovative learning environments. The second theme is about education that supports and encourages learner enterprise. The third theme is education that promotes lifelong learning. The fourth theme concerns education that restores hope for both teachers and learners. The last theme discusses the systemic inhibitors to ideal education. These themes are presented next.

1. Innovative learning environments

Participants repeatedly emphasized the need for education that takes place in an innovative learning environment. Fluid and flexible classrooms and gardens as third spaces for learning, were pointed out as crucial to stimulate creativity and motivation. Participant P2 emphasized that *“Learning should take place in a fluid and flexible learning environment”* are important in supporting learning.

Participants highlighted the value of learning beyond the traditional classroom, particularly the role of outdoors in supporting understanding. Participant P3 stated that *“The environment outside the classroom is fascinating. Learners can visualise what they are learning about and reconnect them with their environment. One learner said, she has never planted something that grew until she was able to eat it. She had this opportunity here. In the process, she learned about the scientific processes involved in the plant growing from seedling to a fully grown plant. It was amazing for her. This is what I think is ideal educational practices.”*

Participants emphasised the role of school food gardens as alternative learning spaces in the context of overcrowded classrooms. Participant P5 emphasized *“You know, our classrooms are overcrowded. School food gardens become our flexible learning space. When learners are out into the gardens, they are not only learning, but also in a conducive environment. Of course, this needs to be controlled.”*

Furthermore, participants noted the collaborative nature of learning activities within these environments. Participant P2 noted that *“Some of the activities require learners to work collaboratively in groups, creating opportunities for them to interact with each other and with the caretakers.”*

2. Education that supports and encourages learner enterprise

Participants highlighted education that encourages learner enterprise as an important aspect of schooling. Participant P2 referred to *“encouraging hustlers.”* Participant P3 emphasised *“spaces for creating the future, including dreaming, experimenting, collaborating, and innovating, often conceptualised as makerspaces.”* Participant P4 referred to *“inviting socialpreneurship, that is, bringing knowledge of the informal*

economy into the classroom.” Participant P4 further stated that *“it must be such that viable dreams are supported”*.

3. Education that promotes lifelong learning

Participants highlighted education that promotes lifelong learning as an important dimension of schooling. Participant P1 stated *“Education should enable learners to continuously develop new skills and knowledge to enhance quality of life and employment prospects.”* Similarly, Participant P2 stated that *“Education should enable learners and teachers to acquire skills that enable them to survive. Age should not matter.”* Participant P5 further linked learning to school gardens as collaborative spaces where knowledge is co-constructed. Participant P5 stated that *“My take is that education must offer learners knowledge that enables them to shift mindset and know that they are active constructors and communicators of knowledge. This is possible when we take learners into the gardens. There, knowledge is constructed collaboratively with learners asking questions and providing solutions to the problems.”* Participant P4 added that *“Learners must learn how to learn.”*

4. Education that restores hope to both teachers and learners

Participants highlighted education that restores hope to both teachers and learners as an important dimension of schooling. Participant P6 stated that *“The education system must restore hope to our children, more especially from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. We cannot continue with the education that favours certain class.”* Participant P4 further stated that *“Yes the education system must be reconfigured and teachers take responsibility to restore some hope in their learners. But who restores hope to the teachers?”*

5. Systemic inhibitors to ideal education

Participants highlighted systemic inhibitors to ideal education as a key concern affecting teaching and learning. Participant P1 stated that *“The curriculum should be such that it integrates learning areas and teachers should see this bigger picture. I can tell you now that not all teachers see the interconnectedness of learning areas and do not consciously relate topics, they teach to all the other learning areas. This is particularly important when, for example, you take learners into the garden.”* Participant P2 noted that *“The curriculum must be such that it teaches learners life skills. Our current curriculum is not doing that. Learners who drop out of school at any level do not seem to have life skills they attribute from schooling.”*

Participant P3 further stated that *“We assess learners for progressing them and not of learning. We definitely need to turn this around. If we are doing it right, we should know from the foundation phase that learners cannot read and write.”* Participant P4 added that *“Problem-based approach could go a long way in preparing learners towards a sustainable future. We undermine this aspect in our teaching approaches, and we are not equipping learners with problem solving and decision-making skills to deal with challenges we are facing today and in future.”*

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a nuanced and rich understanding of what is considered quality education from the perspectives of township school principals who took part in the study. Their insights, which are grounded in the lived realities of their schools and communities, expose the urgent need to rethink and Africanise SDG 4 in order to better align with the challenges and aspirations of the African context. The five themes that emerge from the data-innovative learning environments, education that supports learner enterprise, lifelong learning, restoring hope and systemic inhibitors- allow for a reimagining education for sustainable futures.

Innovative learning environments

In terms of innovative learning environments, the principals emphasized the importance of fluid, flexible, and creative spaces, such as school food gardens, as "third spaces" for learning (Moje et al., 2004). These spaces not only foster creativity and problem-solving but also reconnect learners with their environment and community. This finding resonates with Castle's (1961) assertion that education should extend beyond the classroom to include life-wide learning experiences. The school food gardens, in particular, serve as a practical example of how education can address immediate community needs such as food insecurity while also teaching scientific concepts and collaborative skills. In addition, the finding aligns with Engeström and Sannino's (2016) and Lotz-Sistika's (2017) concept of expansive learning, which contends that education need not be confined to traditional settings but should involve real-world problem-solving.

This finding also aligns with the Ubuntu philosophy and pedagogy, which advocate interconnectedness and communal well-being. Through encouragement of school/community relationships via the food gardens, this embodies the concept that a person is a person through other people. However, the challenge lies in expanding these spaces to other areas within a system that still emphasizes colonial pedagogies and outlooks. As Mucina (2013) argues, concepts such as Ubuntu remain marginalized in favour of Western models. Enabling EfSF to take root and become more widespread will require policymakers to prioritize funding for projects like school gardens, grassroots innovations that align with local communities and contexts.

Education that supports and encourages learner enterprise

The findings also highlight the need for education at all levels to nurture an entrepreneurship mindset among learners, given that local communities face widespread unemployment and poverty (Nyathi et al., 2024). This aligns with Sánchez's (2011) stance that entrepreneurial skills are essential for economic growth, especially in countries of the global South. It can be argued that the call to integrate the practical aspects of the informal economy into classrooms is revolutionary, as it challenges the Eurocentric bias of formal curricula that often disregard local economic realities (Biraimah et al., 2024). Furthermore, Ubuntu pedagogy, which emphasizes collaboration and shared success, is an ideal framework for teaching entrepreneurship from a perspective that prioritizes community upliftment over individual profit.

In this regard, teaching entrepreneurship can be underpinned by the notion that business is not just a means of personal survival but can be a tool for collective advancement

(Rocha et al., 2024). Such an approach aims to decolonize entrepreneurship education by grounding it in local African values of solidarity and mutual support. However, systemic barriers, such as rigid curricula and inadequate teacher training, hinder such innovations. As noted by Lotz-Sisitka (2013), the South African education system struggles with decontextualized content from an African perspective that fails to equip learners with local challenges. A paradigm shift is hence needed that will align the curricula with the realities of informal economies and grassroots innovation.

Education that promotes lifelong learning

All the Principals wholly endorsed lifelong learning as a cornerstone of quality education. This aligns with UNESCO's (2015) vision of education as a "global common good" that adapts to societal changes. It also aligns with Lall's (2011) contention that continuous learning can enable individuals to survive in changing environments. Especially in South Africa, lifelong learning is essential because the economy is constantly changing, especially in the face of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and persistent inequality, which require re-skilling and adaptation to emerging sectors like the gig economy (Gonese & Ngepah, 2024). In this context, the Ubuntu Philosophy, which views education as a lifelong process that supports communal growth, reinforces this theme (Vanderyar & Mohale, 2022). This is evident in the principals' focus on collaborative learning in the school gardens, which reflects collective knowledge construction. However, the current curricula's over-reliance on theoretical learning and standardized assessments counters this vision (Mabunda, 2023). As Participant P3 observed, assessments will often prioritize progression over actual learning, perpetuating a cycle of superficial education. This can be addressed by emphasizing teacher training that encourages critical thinking and adaptability. As Participant P4 suggested, problem-based learning can be a viable approach that requires systemic support rather than just token implementation.

Education that restores hope to both teachers and learners

In the context of the emotional dimension of education, the principals identified hope as an important yet overlooked factor in educational outcomes (Ghbari et al., 2025). Many learners, especially those from low-income backgrounds, perceive schooling as being futile due to systemic inequalities. This finding aligns with Sen's (1993) capability approach, which views poverty as a deprivation of agency and opportunity. Education must thus not only impart skills but must also restore the learner's belief in their own potential. In this regard, Ubuntu's philosophy of dignity and compassion provides a basis for hope-centered education. As emphasized by Participant P6, teachers play a key role in affirming a learner's humanity and potential. A counter was raised by the principals when they asked, 'Who provides hope to the teachers?' This is because teachers often get demoralized due to a lack of resources to support teaching, social neglect, and even the need to sustain optimism (Keese, 2018). There is a need for all-round support systems for both emotional and material needs within schools. These can include policy interventions, mental support programs, and recognition of the key role teachers play within communities.

Systemic inhibitors to ideal education

The principals identified several systemic barriers as bottlenecks to ideal education. These included outdated curricula, rigid assessment methods, and most glaringly, a lack of innovative pedagogies (Zwedu, 2017). These barriers align with Lotz-Sisitka's (2011) recommendation for a socio-cultural approach to quality education, which prioritizes 'learning as connection' over rote learning. For example, Participant P2 observed that school dropouts often lack practical skills, reflecting a system divorced from community needs. Similarly, Participant P4's criticism of assessment practices illustrated a disconnection between policy and reality. To overcome these barriers, there is a need for a radical re-thinking of education as offered in countries of the global South (Kothari, 2017). Allmendinger's (2016) conceptualization of an ideal system, which involves inclusion, adaptability, and interconnectedness, could be a useful starting point. However, such reforms must be based upon African perspectives rather than imported models, as implied by the principals. This is supported by Mbembe (2015), who argues that decolonizing the curriculum is not just about content but must center on indigenous knowledge and pedagogies such as Ubuntu.

In summary, the study's findings point to the potential of Ubuntu philosophy to inform a uniquely African vision of SDG 4. This is because Ubuntu's principles of interconnectedness, compassion, and collective growth closely align with the ideals of education. This is exemplified in the use of food gardens to encourage bonds between schools and the community, as they address practical needs. However, as Mucina (2013) cautions, integrating Ubuntu into education will require radical rethinking and dismantling Eurocentric hierarchies that dismiss indigenous knowledge. It will also require policymakers to engage with grassroots stakeholders, like the principals in this study, to co-create curricula that reflect local realities. It is thus evident that Ubuntu's emphasis on co-creation of knowledge challenges top-down reforms (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Instead, it advocates participatory approaches in which teachers, learners, and communities collectively shape education.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing call for Africanising SDG4 through the inclusion of voices at the forefront of education, namely, school principals. Their vision shows the need for a quality education that is inclusive, adaptive, and deeply rooted in African values. A key contribution of this study is bringing school principals' voices into SDG 4 debates, which are often policy-driven and global in nature, while also showing that quality education is locally defined and context-specific rather than universal or one-size-fits-all. It further argues that Africanising SDG 4 requires drawing on local leadership knowledge and lived school realities, thereby positioning principals as knowledge producers rather than merely policy implementers. Thus, for EfSF to become a reality in South Africa, policymakers and all relevant stakeholders need to move beyond rhetoric and embrace some of the radical reforms proposed by principals. This should include a drastic rethinking of curricula, assessments, and teacher support through an African lens. As the principals in this study have shown, the solution to education challenges already exists within local communities. What is lacking is the political will to amplify them. It can then be argued that Africanizing SDG 4 should not be limited to achieving a global target. However, it is about reclaiming education as a means for sustainable, equitable, and

hopeful futures. As Participant P5 pointed out, 'Learners must learn how to learn'. In this fast-changing world, this may be the most vital skill of all.

It is suggested that more studies be conducted on perceptions of school managers and other practitioners on different African philosophies like Sakhu-Djaer (refers to a process of deep and profound exploration of the human experience for African people, aiming to understand and assert their selfhood and reality in a way that is dignity-affirming and expansive) and Kmt-Nubia/BaNtu-Kongo (refers to the interconnectedness of ancient Egyptian (Kmt), Nubian, and Bantu-Kongo cultures), particularly in the context of Pan-African thought and philosophy. It suggests a shared heritage and worldview rooted in African origins and traditions, and how these can be integrated into school curricula. This will assist in centering African epistemologies and thought not only to challenge colonial legacies, but also to contribute to a more just, inclusive, and appropriate knowledge system that reflects African values like ubuntu.

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