

## Exploring *Batho Pele* and *Ubuntu* Principles in the School Social Work Practice in South Africa: A Narrative Literature Review

Asanda Boboyi<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Integrating Batho Pele principles and Ubuntu philosophy provides a culturally relevant and values-driven framework for addressing South African school social work's complex challenges. Grounded in transparency, accountability, and citizen-centred service principles, Batho Pele aligns seamlessly with Ubuntu's emphasis on interconnectedness, compassion, and mutual respect. Together, these frameworks offer a holistic and transformative approach to reimagining school social work practices in ways that prioritise both individual and community well-being. This conceptual paper employs a narrative literature review to explore the potential correlation between these two frameworks. It thoroughly examines the Batho Pele principles, provides an overview of Ubuntu philosophy and its core tenets, and critically analyses their correlation. The discussion extends to the relevance of these frameworks in addressing the multifaceted demands of school social work, particularly in fostering equity, inclusivity, and social cohesion. Therefore, the paper advocates for a school social work practice that is contextually meaningful and impactful by bridging these principles. Such a practice supports the holistic development of learners and their communities while emphasising the urgent need for a paradigm shift rooted in South Africa's rich philosophical heritage. This integrated approach aims to create a more equitable, empathetic, and sustainable educational environment.*

**Keywords:** *Batho Pele principles, Ubuntu philosophy, School social work, Interconnectedness, mutual respect.*

### Introduction

School social work in South Africa faces significant challenges despite its immense potential to address the social issues affecting learners (Boboyi, 2024a; Makholwa & Muleya, 2025; Pretorius, 2020). While historically significant and guided by policy frameworks, the profession has struggled with limited integration into the broader education system (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020). South African schools contend with a multitude of challenges, such as inter alia poverty, HIV, child-headed households, teenage pregnancies, bullying, school violence, and substance abuse (Boboyi & Masilo, 2024; Madokhwe & Boboyi, 2025; Notana & Boboyi, 2025; Pretorius, 2016). Despite considerable government investment in education, issues such as inadequate infrastructure and resource shortages persist, compounding these difficulties (Pretorius, 2016). Collaborative efforts between school social workers and educators are essential to address the social contexts affecting learners and enhance the quality of education (Pretorius, 2020). From a legal perspective, social workers are seen as pivotal in fully realising learners' right to quality education, particularly within the 4A framework, which emphasises education that is available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable (Reyneke, 2018). However, integrating social work into the South African education system remains slow and complex, undermining the potential benefits for both learners and the education system (Pretorius, 2020).

The *Batho Pele* principles, introduced in 1997, were designed to improve public service delivery by prioritising efficiency, effectiveness, and ethical standards (Nzimakwe & Mpehle, 2012). These principles, alongside the *Ubuntu* philosophy, emphasise putting people first and fostering a sense of shared humanity (Amusan & Mchunu, 2017; Omodan, 2020). Despite their noble ideals, challenges in implementing *Batho Pele* persist, particularly in departments like Home Affairs, where the legacies of historical discrimination still hinder service delivery (Moodley, 2012). These principles support a vision of flourishing individuals within their diversity, reflecting South Africa's national motto, "unity in diversity" (Van Staden, 2010:15). However, xenophobic attacks in 2008 and 2015 have highlighted the limitations of *Batho Pele* and *Ubuntu* in fostering true social cohesion (Amusan & Mchunu, 2017). Thus, addressing these challenges unequivocally

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Social Work, Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha, South Africa. E-mail: [aboboyi@wsu.ac.za](mailto:aboboyi@wsu.ac.za). ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3520-5770>

requires ongoing efforts to refine service delivery processes, enhance accessibility, and promote inclusivity in alignment with constitutional values.

Integrating *Batho Pele* principles and *Ubuntu* philosophy into school social work practice is pivotal for fostering a culturally responsive and ethically sound approach to addressing the diverse challenges within South African schools. *Batho Pele*'s focus on accountability, transparency, and citizen-centred service offers a structured framework for delivering equitable and high-quality support to learners and their families (Molobela, 2024; Naidoo & Ramphal, 2019). Meanwhile, *Ubuntu*'s emphasis on interconnectedness, mutual respect, and compassion deeply resonates with South African communities' social and cultural realities, providing a relational foundation for social work interventions (Boboyi, 2024b). Together, these frameworks significantly enhance the relevance and impact of school social work by promoting inclusivity, ethical decision-making, and collaborative problem-solving. This integration addresses systemic challenges such as inequality and school violence while strengthening the role of school social workers in nurturing the holistic well-being of learners (Lungu & Boboyi, 2025). The paper underscores the importance of a paradigm shift that draws on South Africa's philosophical heritage, advocating for a transformative and contextually grounded school social work practice.

### Research Aim and Objectives

This conceptual paper explores integrating *Batho Pele* principles and *Ubuntu* philosophy to enhance ethical, culturally responsive, and effective school social work practice in South Africa. The objectives below guide the integration of these principles:

- To provide a detailed explanation of the *Batho Pele* principles.
- To explore an overview of the *Ubuntu* philosophy and its key tenets.
- To discuss the correlation between *Batho Pele* principles and *Ubuntu* philosophy.
- To explore the relevance of these frameworks to the school social work practice.

### Methodology

Although a conceptual or theoretical paper does not typically require a methodology section due to the absence of participant involvement, it remains important to explain the approach used to synthesise the literature. For this reason, a narrative literature review was employed to systematically synthesise existing literature on *Batho Pele* principles and *Ubuntu* philosophy. This approach is particularly suited to conceptual and theoretical papers as it allows for a broad and comprehensive exploration of the subject matter (Boboyi, 2024c; Boboyi & Kang'ethe, 2024; Reyneke, 2020). Relevant literature was sourced using established academic databases and search engines, including Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, PubMed, and JSTOR. The primary search terms employed were "*Batho Pele*" and "*Ubuntu*." To ensure the relevance and rigour of the review, the study focused on peer-reviewed publications spanning the years 2000 to 2025. Non-peer-reviewed sources were excluded to maintain the academic integrity of the analysis.

In preparing this conceptual paper, the researcher utilised an AI tool, specifically Grammarly version 10.0, for language editing and grammatical improvements. This software helped refine the clarity and accuracy of the text, ensuring that the final document met academic standards for quality and readability.

### *Batho Pele* Principles

The *Batho Pele* principles, introduced in 1997 through South Africa's White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery, embody a people-centred approach to governance and service delivery (Joel, 2022; Moodley, 2012; Nzimakwe & Mpehle, 2012). Rooted in the ethos of prioritising citizens' needs, these principles guide public institutions towards ethical, transparent, and effective practices (Pietersen, 2014).

With a strong focus on inclusivity, accountability, and quality, *Batho Pele* provides a comprehensive framework to ensure that services are accessible, responsive, and aligned with the democratic values enshrined in South Africa's Constitution (Kuye & Ile, 2007; Molobela, 2024).

School social workers are pivotal in applying *Batho Pele* principles in education, advocating for learners and their families while prioritising their diverse needs within the school system (Reyneke, 2020; Vergottini & Weyers, 2020). Thus, by fostering supportive and inclusive school environments, social workers ensure that resources and services are accessible to all learners (Boboyi, 2024a). Their role extends to facilitating effective communication between families and school staff, promoting accountability and responsiveness to learners' needs (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020). Through these efforts, social workers create safer, more equitable educational spaces, upholding the democratic ideals encapsulated in the *Batho Pele* principles. The principles are outlined below, demonstrating their relevance to school social work:

### **Consultation**

Engaging citizens in decision-making is crucial for addressing their needs and concerns (Joel, 2022). This participatory approach to service delivery resonates strongly with the role of school social workers, who advocate for learners and families to ensure their voices are heard in decisions affecting their education. By facilitating open communication between schools, families, and communities, social workers help integrate diverse perspectives, fostering inclusivity and addressing immediate concerns. This engagement enhances the quality of services provided and strengthens the sense of community within schools.

### **Service standards**

Clear benchmarks for the quality and timeliness of services enable citizens to understand their entitlements and hold service providers accountable (Joel, 2022; Molobela, 2024; Pietersen, 2014). School social workers uphold these standards by ensuring timely interventions that address learners' social, emotional, and academic needs. Therefore, by participating in evaluating these services, they advocate for necessary improvements, monitor outcomes, and promote accountability, ultimately contributing to a higher standard of educational support.

### **Access**

Accessible services are essential for fostering equity and promoting social justice, particularly for marginalised and disadvantaged groups (Joel, 2022; Molobela, 2024). School social workers prioritise access by addressing systemic barriers that impede learners' opportunities. Their efforts ensure a fairer distribution of resources, enabling all learners to thrive academically and socially.

### **Openness and transparency**

Institutions must operate transparently, fostering trust through clear communication about their activities and decisions (Joel, 2022; Molobela, 2024). School social workers are vital in advocating for openness within educational institutions. Social workers build trust and collaboration between schools and their stakeholders by engaging with communities and ensuring that learners' and families' concerns are acknowledged and addressed.

### **Redress**

Effective systems for addressing grievances and correcting errors are critical for ensuring citizens feel heard and respected (Joel, 2022; Molobela, 2024). School social workers act as mediators and advocates, facilitating communication between learners, families, and school authorities to resolve conflicts. This engagement fosters a supportive environment where all voices are valued, creating a culture of respect and understanding.

## Value for money

Efficient and effective resource use is key to delivering high-quality services while avoiding waste (Joel, 2022; Molobela, 2024). School social workers contribute to this principle by addressing learners' social and emotional challenges, connecting them with essential resources, and ensuring that educational funding is directed towards the most pressing community needs. Their collaborative efforts with educators, families, and community services optimise resource allocation and enhance the overall quality of education.

## Ubuntu Philosophy

*Ubuntu* is an African philosophy that emphasises humaneness, community, and social justice, encapsulated in the phrase “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,” which translates to “a person is a person through other people” (Boboyi, 2024b:256; Omodan & Diko, 2021). This philosophy underscores the profound interconnectedness of individuals within a community, highlighting the idea that one's well-being is intrinsically tied to the well-being of others (Boboyi, 2024b; Van Breda, 2019). *Ubuntu* has received significant recognition in social work, emerging as a guiding theme for the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (2020-2030), underscoring its potential to enhance international social work ethics and practices (Bernard Mayaka & Truell, 2021).

The principles of *Ubuntu* closely align with the objectives of social work, particularly in fostering community systems and promoting social protection (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). As such, *Ubuntu* provides a valuable framework for enhancing social work practice, ethics, community engagement, and research across various contexts. It emphasises the importance of collaboration and mutual support within communities, aligning with the social work ethos of empowerment and collective well-being (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Chigangaidze, 2022). The core tenets of *Ubuntu*, outlined below, illustrate its relevance to both social work and broader societal contexts:

### Interconnectedness

*Ubuntu* emphasises the interconnectedness of all people, recognising that the well-being of each individual is inherently linked to the well-being of others and the wider community (Mangena, 2012). This perspective promotes a holistic understanding of relationships, fostering an environment where individuals and communities thrive together (Boboyi, 2024b; Gathogo, 2008).

### Compassion and empathy

At its heart, *Ubuntu* is rooted in compassion and empathy (Boboyi, 2024b). It encourages individuals to cultivate kindness and understanding, prioritising care for the needs and feelings of others. This compassionate approach nurtures deeper community bonds and fosters a profound sense of belonging (Mangena, 2012; Boboyi, 2024b).

### Respect and dignity

*Ubuntu* upholds the inherent dignity of every individual, advocating for mutual respect and the recognition of each person's intrinsic worth (Gathogo, 2008). Therefore, by valuing diverse perspectives and experiences, *Ubuntu* fosters a culture where everyone feels acknowledged, appreciated, and empowered (Boboyi, 2024b; Gathogo, 2008).

### Collective responsibility

A fundamental tenet of *Ubuntu* is collective responsibility, where individuals actively contribute to the development of their communities and share accountability for addressing common challenges (Mangena, 2012). This commitment to collaboration strengthens resilience and unity, ensuring no one is left behind (Boboyi, 2024b; Mangena, 2012).

## Harmony and reconciliation

*Ubuntu* promotes harmony and reconciliation, particularly in conflict, by encouraging dialogue, understanding, and resolution (Mangena, 2012). This philosophy prioritises peace and unity over division, nurturing relationships and paving the way for societal healing and cohesion (Gathogo, 2008; Mangena, 2012).

## Humanity and generosity

*Ubuntu* celebrates the values of humanity and generosity, viewing acts of giving, sharing, and selflessness as foundational to building strong and supportive communities (Boboyi, 2024b). These virtues inspire individuals to uplift one another, creating an inclusive culture where contributions are valued and cherished (Boboyi, 2024b; Mangena, 2012).

In essence, *Ubuntu* provides a philosophical framework that resonates deeply with the principles and objectives of social work. It encourages practices prioritising interconnectedness, compassion, and collective responsibility, reinforcing community engagement and social justice ideals. Therefore, by integrating *Ubuntu* into social work, practitioners can foster meaningful change, empowering individuals and strengthening communities.

## The Correlation between *Batho Pele* Principles and *Ubuntu* Philosophy

The concept of *Ubuntu*, closely linked to the *Batho Pele* ethos of "people first," underscores interconnectedness, respect for diversity, and the centrality of humanity within African philosophy (Van Staden, 2011). These principles have proven valuable in enhancing workplace performance and addressing socio-economic challenges in post-apartheid South Africa (Mapadimeng, 2007). However, *Ubuntu* has faced criticism for being elitist and not fully reflective of contemporary societal realities (Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013). Its application in governance has also been questioned, particularly in the wake of xenophobic attacks on foreigners in recent years (Amusan & Mchunu, 2017). Despite these critiques, the alignment between *Batho Pele* principles and *Ubuntu* philosophy remains evident, with their shared objectives of ethical conduct and collective well-being making their integration particularly relevant for contexts such as school social work. In this field, addressing social and economic disparities is crucial, and exploring how these traditional values can be incorporated into public services and workplace strategies is essential for fostering societal progress. The correlation between these principles is discussed below, based on the researcher's observations:

### The shared focus on people-centeredness

The principles of *Batho Pele* and *Ubuntu* share a strong emphasis on people-centred approaches. *Batho Pele*, meaning "People first," prioritises individual needs and dignity in service delivery, ensuring everyone is treated respectfully and their unique circumstances acknowledged (Nzimakwe & Mpehle, 2012). Similarly, *Ubuntu*, expressed in the phrase "*I am because we are*," highlights the interconnectedness within communities and underscores the relationship between personal and collective well-being (Mangaliso, 2001). Together, these frameworks promote a holistic model that values individuals while fostering a sense of collective humanity.

### Accountability and ethical conduct

*Batho Pele* places significant importance on transparency, accountability, and redress, ensuring that service providers act with integrity and responsibility toward citizens (Nkambule & Ngubane, 2023). This commitment builds trust and confidence in public services. Complementing *Batho Pele*, *Ubuntu* emphasises moral behaviour, mutual respect, and harmony within communities (Amusan & Mchunu, 2017). These principles provide a robust foundation for ethical, responsive, and culturally relevant practices when integrated. This correlation enhances service delivery and enriches the social fabric of communities, creating a society where every individual feels valued and heard, thereby advancing justice and equity.



## Inclusivity and equity

The *Batho Pele* principles are rooted in accessible and equitable service delivery, focusing on addressing the needs of marginalised and underserved groups. These principles establish a framework prioritising the needs of all citizens, especially those historically excluded (Zondo, 2018). Similarly, *Ubuntu* emphasises communal solidarity and interconnectedness, stressing that individual well-being is intrinsically tied to the community's well-being (Mangaliso, 2001). This alignment fosters inclusivity, ensuring every member of society is valued, and no one is left behind. By integrating these principles, social interventions can be designed to address diverse community needs while promoting social justice.

Promoting harmony and reconciliation is another critical aspect of these frameworks, particularly for conflict resolution and relationship restoration. *Batho Pele*'s focus on redress aligns closely with *Ubuntu*'s emphasis on harmony (Amusan & Mchunu, 2017). Together, they cultivate trust and cooperation among stakeholders, especially in schools where positive interactions are essential for creating supportive and cohesive communities.

## Holistic community development

*Batho Pele* emphasises efficient service delivery, while *Ubuntu* provides a moral and philosophical foundation that strengthens community well-being. Translating to "People First," *Batho Pele* underscores accountability, transparency, and responsiveness, ensuring that public services effectively meet citizens' needs (Nzimakwe & Mpehle, 2012). In contrast, *Ubuntu* highlights interconnectedness, compassion, and shared humanity, fostering deeper relationships and ethical considerations (Mangaliso, 2001). The integration of these frameworks enables practitioners to deliver effective and empathetic services. This holistic approach recognises that sustainable development depends on the intersection of technical service delivery and the relational fabric of communities. By blending *Batho Pele*'s structured guidelines with *Ubuntu*'s relational values, service providers can foster inclusivity and empathy, promoting long-term community welfare and improving the quality of life for all.

## Relevance of *Batho Pele* and *Ubuntu* in the School Social Work Practice

Integrating the *Batho Pele* principles and *Ubuntu* philosophy into school social work practice offers a transformative framework for creating inclusive, ethical, and culturally responsive interventions. These principles are especially relevant in addressing the complex challenges faced by South African schools, where resource disparities, social inequalities, and systemic issues often hinder learners' holistic development (Nzimakwe & Mpehle, 2012; Zondo, 2022).

The *Batho Pele* principles prioritise people-centredness, ensuring learners' needs are respected and addressed. This focus is particularly important in schools where learners come from diverse backgrounds and face varying socio-economic challenges. Similarly, *Ubuntu* underscores the interconnectedness of individuals within their communities, emphasising that each learner's well-being is intricately linked to the collective harmony of the school environment (Boboyi, 2024b; Mangaliso, 2001). These principles promote a service approach that values every learner while fostering a sense of shared humanity.

These frameworks empower school social workers to adopt ethical and accountable practices. *Batho Pele*'s emphasis on transparency and redress ensures that interventions are equitable and fair, fostering trust among learners, parents, and educators (Nkambule & Ngubane, 2023; Swana, 2008). For instance, school social workers can use these principles to mediate conflicts or address disciplinary issues, offering impartial and effective solutions. *Ubuntu* complements these efforts by promoting empathy, mutual respect, and reconciliation, key elements for restoring relationships and building positive school cultures (Amusan & Mchunu, 2017; Mabasa, 2020).

In addition, these frameworks address the persistent inequities and marginalisation experienced by many learners. *Batho Pele* emphasises equitable access to services, focusing on historically disadvantaged groups, while *Ubuntu*'s communal ethos fosters solidarity and inclusivity (Boboyi, 2024b; Zondo, 2018). This dual

approach enables school social workers to advocate effectively for marginalised learners and implement group-based programmes that promote unity and cohesion within the school community.

Furthermore, these principles support holistic community development by integrating learners' needs with their families and the wider community. *Batho Pele* encourages responsiveness and efficiency in connecting schools with external services, while *Ubuntu* provides the moral foundation for building sustainable partnerships (Nzimakwe & Mpehle, 2012; Zondo, 2022). For example, social workers can organise community workshops or parent engagement sessions to strengthen ties between schools and their communities. This alignment between *Batho Pele*'s practical guidelines and *Ubuntu*'s relational values equips social workers to deliver impactful interventions that benefit individual learners and the broader school ecosystem.

Incorporating *Batho Pele* and *Ubuntu* into school social work practice advances the goals of this study by proposing a culturally grounded framework that addresses systemic challenges and promotes social justice. These principles offer a comprehensive approach to creating supportive school environments where learners feel valued, heard, and empowered to thrive. Their integration is essential for fostering equity, harmony, and sustainable development within South Africa's education system.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, integrating the *Batho Pele* principles and *Ubuntu* philosophy into school social work practice presents a powerful, culturally grounded framework for addressing the complex challenges faced by South African schools. Rooted in accountability, inclusivity, and interconnectedness, these principles provide both ethical guidance and practical tools to foster equitable and holistic interventions. By blending *Batho Pele*'s emphasis on transparency and efficiency with *Ubuntu*'s focus on compassion and community, school social workers can cultivate supportive environments that prioritise learners' well-being while promoting social cohesion. This correlation tackles systemic inequities and strengthens the relational fabric of school communities, fostering harmony, respect, and collective empowerment. The integration of these frameworks underscores the necessity of culturally relevant and contextually appropriate approaches in advancing social justice, ensuring that every learner feels valued, supported, and empowered to thrive. This paper advocates for a paradigm shift in school social work practice, urging the adoption of models that embrace South Africa's rich philosophical heritage and its transformative potential to drive meaningful and sustainable change in education.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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