



It Takes a Village to Raise a Child: Sankofa, Ubuntu, and Ujamaa as Counter-Frameworks for Anti-Colonial Education

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Citation: Gyamerah, K. (2025). It Takes a Village to Raise a Child: Sankofa, Ubuntu, and Ujamaa as Counter-Frameworks for Anti-Colonial Education. *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Success*, 4, 93-110.

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Received: 06/20/2025

Accepted: 10/07/2025

Published: 10/16/2025

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Abstract. This paper advances the African-centred philosophies of Sankofa, Ubuntu, and Ujamaa (USU) as a critical anticolonial praxis for reimagining K–12 education in Canada. It interrogates the racialized and colonial architectures of schooling, manifested through Eurocentric curricula, punitive disciplinary regimes, and inequitable assessment practices that continue to marginalize Black, Indigenous, racialized, disabled, and other systematically minoritized students. Drawing on USU, the paper conceptualizes education as a relational and anticolonial project oriented toward radical belonging, ethical agency, critical consciousness, and collective flourishing. Through a critical anticolonial analysis, it examines how Ubuntu’s ethic of interconnectedness, Sankofa’s call for critical remembrance, and Ujamaa’s emphasis on cooperative responsibility collectively challenge the colonial logics that underpin the Canadian K–12 education system. The paper concludes by outlining key implications for curriculum, assessment, and policy.

Keywords: Ubuntu, Sankofa, Ujamaa, Anti-colonial Education, K-12 Education.



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Introduction

Globally, education systems are grappling with complex challenges that expose enduring social inequities and structural exclusions. In Canada, Black students in particular have long called for learning conditions that are culturally responsive and attentive to their diverse needs (Jean-Pierre, 2021; Munroe et al., 2024). The structural legacy of colonialism is rooted in Canadian schooling and thus shaping the everyday experiences of historically marginalized students (Dei et al., 2022; James & Turner, 2017; Sensoy, 2024). In response, scholars and practitioners have advanced calls for transformative shifts in pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment practices that centre critical consciousness, student agency, and collective flourishing (Baidoo-Anu et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024; Pillay et al., 2022). Critical educational research has emphasized culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies as frameworks to foster equity, belonging, and inclusion (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). However, realizing such change requires more than just adding critical frameworks to pre-existing inequitable educational systems. It calls for systemic restructuring and a re-evaluation of what counts as knowledge and success in education. Importantly, integrating cultural relevance in teaching and learning must also extend beyond superficial changes. Students occupy hybrid and evolving cultural locations, and thus cultural relevance entails an ongoing ethical relation to communities, histories, and knowledge practices. This orientation resists the market logics that commodify culture as curricular décor and instead asks how power structures shape which cultures count, who gets to represent them, and to what ends. While scholarship has traced how intersecting systems of oppression constrain diverse learners (Almansori et al., 2025; Brady, 2017; James & Turner, 2017; Mkhize, 2025), comparatively less attention has been given to the epistemic and pedagogical possibilities provided by African-centred philosophies. This article advances three interconnected relational frameworks—Ubuntu, Sankofa, and Ujamaa (USU) as an anticolonial orientation for reimagining Canadian K–12 education. Ubuntu, with its insistence that humanity is realized through others, unsettles the competitive individualism promoted by formal schooling by foregrounding communal responsibility. Sankofa also disrupts historical unknowing through critical remembrance by offering a foundation for a critically reflexive and future-oriented learning. Similarly, Ujamaa emphasizes cooperative responsibility and collective well-being, challenging neoliberal definitions of educational success premised on individual student achievement. In this paper, *hegemonic* refers to dominant logics and structures such as curricular violence, rigid assessment regimes, and deficit framings that reproduce hierarchies of knowledge and sustain systemic inequities. By contrast, *non-hegemonic* encompasses dialogic, relational, and ethical alternatives that create spaces of possibility without simply replacing one paradigm with another. As decolonial scholars have cautioned us to be circumspect of rigid binaries as they might reinscribe colonial dominance if framed as mutually exclusive

(Mignolo & Walsh, 2018'; Zembylas, 2025). I approach the hegemonic/non-hegemonic relationship as a tension-filled space of contestation where alternative knowledge systems and approaches can engage critically.

The paper begins with a contextual overview of Canadian K–12 education, focusing on the experiences of racially and culturally minoritized students. It then elaborates the USU framework and examines its potential contributions to fostering anticolonial education. The paper concludes with implications for curriculum, policy, and practice.

The Colonial and Neoliberal Foundations of Canadian K–12 Education

Education is often legislated and discursively framed as a public good with the purpose to promote critical thinking, socialization, intellectual development, and upward mobility for all youth (OECD, 2017; Tikly, 2020). However, the notion of education as a public good is contested. For some researchers, the purpose of education must involve a collective investment, democratic participation, and the flourishing of all citizens (Marginson, 2011; Robertson, 2012). For others, the purpose of education has continuously been framed through neoliberal logics and as an individual investment in human capital and future employability (Connell, 2013; Giroux, 2014; Tikly & Barrett, 2012). In Canada, neoliberal reforms have privileged the latter interpretation, narrowing the purpose of education to labour market preparation while marginalizing its civic and relational purposes (Nchigal, 2025). Such shifts manifest in standardized testing, outcome-driven accountability, and competitive rankings systematically disadvantage racialized students while reinforcing narrow definitions of success that obscure structural inequalities (Nelson-Barber et al., 2025; Eizadirad, 2019; Menezes et al., 2016; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2025; People for Education, 2020). These neoliberal logics intersect with the colonial structures of Canadian K-12 schooling (Dei et al., 2022), which continue to shape what knowledge is valued, how students are assessed, and how discipline is enacted. Also, the everydayness of colonialism (Mohammed, 2022) manifests in Eurocentric curricula, the marginalization of non-Western knowledges, and the exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and other racialized voices from decision-making in schools (Brady, 2017; Butler, 2023). Moreover, the privilege of Western knowledge systems sustains a racialized hierarchy in which those closest to Eurocentric norms receive recognition and privilege in classrooms (Arday, 2018). These systemic issues raise pressing questions about who education serves and whose knowledge, identities, and experiences are centred within Canadian K–12 schooling spaces.

The Exclusion of Black and Racialized Students from Curricula and Decision-Making

Research has shown that Black students feel alienated from school spaces due to the erasure of their histories, cultural knowledge, and lived experiences (Codjoe, 2006; James & Turner, 2017). Within the Canadian context, the exclusion of Afro-diasporic contributions and worldviews in education shows racialized students that their identities are not valued in the classroom (Kanu, 2011; Montgomery, 2005). Further, student voices are often absent from educational decision-making, particularly when it comes to curriculum development, assessment policies, and disciplinary mechanisms (Munroe et al., 2024; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; People for Education, 2020). Traditional schooling structures also reinforce hierarchical power dynamics that mirror colonial schooling policies, positioning students as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active contributors to their learning (LaFlamme, 2025). Research however suggests that when students are given opportunities to shape their educational experiences, they demonstrate higher levels of engagement, motivation, and academic success (Mitra, 2008; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Cook-Sather, 2006). In contrast, Eurocentric education systems prioritize knowledge produced by dominant Western institutions and often dismiss the intellectual contributions of Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities (Araujo & Maeso, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Standardized Testing, Streaming, and the Achievement Discourse

Assessment practices in Canadian K-12 education are heavily rooted in colonial and Eurocentric traditions that continue to produce inequitable outcomes for minoritized students (e.g., Eizadirad, 2020). For instance, standardized testing and gifted tracking emerged in part from eugenicist models aimed at stratifying intelligence along racial lines (Hendrix, 2022). These practices privilege white, middle-class students while penalizing minoritized ones, as evidenced by accounts of how EQAO standardized assessments are experienced by racialized Grade 3 children, parents, and educators in Ontario (Eizadirad, 2020). Despite decades of evidence regarding racial and class-based biases of standardized testing, education systems continue to rely on these metrics as primary tools for evaluating achievement and academic mobility. The push for standardized assessment is often justified through claims of accountability, meritocracy, and objectivity, yet these justifications rest on colonial systems of classification, racial stratification, and economic exclusion (Baidoo-Anu & Deluca, 2023; Baidoo-Anu & Ennu-Baidoo, 2024). Globally, policymakers remain fixated on standardized testing's 'achievement' metrics, reinforcing discourses that position historically marginalized students as underachievers (Teltemann & Schunck, 2020). In the field of mathematics education however, Gutierrez (2008) argued that conversations on achievement gap has become a gap gazing endeavour. She defines gap gazing as the persistent focus on disparities in standardized test scores (achievement gaps) without

interrogating the racist, colonial, and deficit-laden systems that produce those gaps. Also, achievement gaps is often used to pathologize Black and racialized students, framing them as lacking, behind, or in need of catching up, rather than examining how whiteness is normalized in our schools (Assari et al., 2021). As a result, critical scholars have called for a shift in reframing the conversation from achievement gaps to “opportunity gaps,” which highlight the inequities in school funding, teacher expectations, and access to educational resources and how it impacts racialized students (Eizadirad, 2019; Shukla et al., 2022). For instance, Ontario’s Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) assessments play a significant role in shaping how student performance is evaluated, these tests however fail to account for systemic disparities in resources and cultural biases embedded in test design (Eizadirad, 2019). Similar standardized testing regimes exist across Canada, including British Columbia’s Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) and Alberta’s Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) both of which reproduce an education system centered on ranking and comparison. Hence, Black, Indigenous, immigrant and disabled students are disproportionately framed as “underachievers,” despite structural barriers that limit their educational success (Gyamerah, 2024). Importantly, these rigid assessment culture fails to capture diverse ways of knowing, critical thinking skills, and alternative pedagogies rooted in Black, Indigenous, and Afro-diasporic traditions (Baidoo-Anu et al., 2024; Xu & Ball, 2024). The systemic inequities in the Canadian K–12 education system ranging from colonial curricula and racialized discipline to biased assessment demand urgent transformation (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2025; Hampton, 2010). Existing policies and pedagogical approaches continue to exclude Black and Indigenous students, reinforcing cycles of educational oppression (Zinga & Styres, 2019). In response, this paper argues for the need to learn from other ways of knowing such as USU, which provide alternative epistemic and ontological pathways for reimagining teaching, learning, and assessment especially within K-12 education. The following section presents USU and examines how they can contribute to dismantling colonial legacies in schooling as well as sketching new possibilities for transformative education in Canada.

Ubuntu: I Am Because We Are

Ubuntu is a philosophy that originates from the Bantu people of Southern Africa. As a philosophical framework, Ubuntu embodies the principles of humanness or “humanity towards others.” At its core, Ubuntu is predicated on communal existence and interdependence (Takyi-Amoako & Assie Lumumba, 2018). According to Abdi (2018), Ubuntu promotes an inter-human ethos, fostering an understanding of our own humanity through the recognition of the humanity of others, including their emotions, needs, behaviors, and experiences. This philosophy emphasizes the necessity of grounding individual identity within the broader community. This principle is epitomized in John Mbiti’s well-known dictum, *“I am because we are,*

and since we are, therefore I am," which asserts that the welfare and wellbeing of the community takes precedence over individual success and interests. Ubuntu thus challenges the idea behind individualism and stands in stark contrast to the Cartesian epistemological tradition that underpins Eurocentric, individualistic ways of knowing and being (Gyamerah, 2024). It has been acknowledged that René Descartes' assertion, *"I think, therefore I am,"* privileges the individual self as the foundation of existence (Osibodu, 2022). While Ubuntu acknowledges individual value, successes and contributions, it is premised on the fact that collective action and mutual support are essential for societal progress (Letseka, 2012). Ubuntu has been recognized as a distinctive form of African humanism. This is encapsulated in the Bantu aphorisms *Motho ke motho ka batho babang* and *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, both of which translate to "a person is a person through other people." (Eze, 2018). However, the Ubuntu humanist and collective orientation does not necessitate an oppressive structure in which individual autonomy is subsumed by communal obligations. It highlights the dynamic interplay between individual and collective well-being. This communitarian ethic critiques Western individualism and proposes a societal vision in which personal well-being is intrinsically tied to the well-being of others (Abdi, 2021). As Pillay (2018) explains, Ubuntu cultivates an appreciation for collective action, communal agency and relationality. In this framework, individuals are not merely independent entities but interconnected beings whose fulfillment is realized through cooperation and shared responsibility. Ubuntu's worldview defines humanity through relationships and emphasizes virtues such as compassion, generosity, respect, and empathy as fundamental markers of a responsible and ethical community member. Moreover, Ubuntu functions as a critique of colonialism's underlying logic that non-Western cultures required "civilizing" through colonization. Colonialism operated under the pretense of "humanizing" non-Western peoples, a narrative that justified exploitative and violent interventions (Eze, 2018). This distorted conception of humanism became the ideological foundation of colonial enterprises in Africa, entrenching racial hierarchies and systemic dispossession under the guise of development and progress. As a result, the Ubuntu philosophy provides an alternative vision of humanity; one that is relational, justice-oriented, inclusive and anchored in ethical responsibility toward others.

Sankofa: Returning to the Past to Retrieve What Has Been Forgotten

Sankofa is a foundational Indigenous African framework originating from the Akan people of Ghana. The term itself is derived from three Akan words: *San* (return), *Ko* (go), and *Fa* (seek, learn, take) (Adjei, 2018; Gyamerah et al., 2023). This philosophy is rooted in the Adinkra symbolism which is a collection of visual representations used by the Akan to express complex philosophical ideas (Adjei, 2018). The Sankofa philosophy is often associated with the proverb *Se wo were fi na wosan ko fa a yenkyi*, which translates to, "It is not wrong to retrieve what is at risk of

being forgotten” (ibid). This maxim reflects the understanding that ancestral wisdom and past experiences are invaluable in navigating contemporary challenges and shaping the future (Dei, 2012).

Symbolically, Sankofa is often depicted as a bird with its head turned backward retrieving an egg while moving forward. The egg serves as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of life and highlights the centrality of Indigenous knowledge and cultural wisdom in fostering self-realization, communal development, and collective survival (Dei, 2020). Importantly, Sankofa is not a call for an uncritical return to a glorified or romanticized past (Gyamerah et al., 2023). Instead, it promotes a critical engagement with culture and history and provide a clarion call to individuals and societies to critically examine past events, gather lessons from them, and apply them in addressing present and future challenges (Ahmed & Gyamerah, 2025).

Also, in terms of learning, Sankofa provides a tripartite prism of reflexive engagement of issues through learning, unlearning, and relearning (Osibodu, 2020). Within this framework, Sankofa serves as an anti-colonial critique of dominant educational models that often exclude Indigenous knowledges and other Southern perspectives in favor of neoliberal and capitalist narratives (Waghid & Hungwe, 2023). Recognizing the value of Indigenous and other non-western knowledges is essential in tackling pressing social, political, cultural, and economic challenges. Moreover, beyond merely looking back, Sankofa advocates for a purposeful and ethically engaged relationship with ancestral wisdom and historical experiences. It provides an avenue for historically marginalized communities to engage in critical remembering (Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 2009) not as a means of idealizing the past but as a tool for ethical reflection and transformative engagement (Ahmed & Gyamerah, 2025). More significantly, the philosophy encourages meaningful dialogues between Indigenous and Euro-Western knowledge systems by emphasizing the importance of cross-epistemological conversations where different worldviews can interact in a reciprocal and constructive manner. Within education, Sankofa is embedded in three interwoven philosophical pillars: (1) historical consciousness, (2) critical remembrance, and (3) reflexive learning. These principles can serve as a key foundational pillar for an anti-oppressive educational futurity.

Ujamaa: Collective Responsibility

Ujamaa is a Swahili philosophical framework popularized by Julius Nyerere. As a philosophical framework, Ujamaa is grounded in community solidarity, mutual learning, and equitable sharing of resources. Nyerere’s theorization of Ujamaa emphasized a blend of economic cooperation, social harmony across diverse ethnic groups, and ethical self-sacrifice for the communal and social good (Nyerere, 1968). In Ujamaa thought, each person is considered a member of the broader family, implying that everyone has a responsibility to contribute to and care for the collective. In this paper, Ujamaa is positioned to critically unpack the popular African adage;

“it takes a village to raise a child” as it shapes our understanding of the value of community and how the idea of “familyhood” is not limited to blood relations. Key tenets of Ujamaa include communal ownership, collective work, egalitarian distribution of resources, and the obligation of every individual to work for the common welfare. As a philosophical framework, Ujamaa provides a counter hegemonic frame to the capitalist, individualistic and consumeristic notions of educational success and achievement (Gyamerah, 2024). The core principles of Ujamaa is premised as cultural foundation to counter unhealthy competition and individualism in education and society more broadly. By grounding social and economic life in cooperative principles, Ujamaa seeks to build an inclusive society where “all members have equal rights and equity in opportunities” and work together without exploitation. In education, Ujamaa’s relevance unfolds through its call for collective responsibility and social purpose in learning. Nyerere himself viewed education as a crucial tool for social transformation and nation-building. He argued that schooling should be oriented toward the community’s needs. This perspective translates into educational practices that de-emphasize rigid competition and instead promote teamwork, civic responsibilities, critical thinking, service, and communal problem-solving.

Also, a classroom shaped by the lessons embedded in the Ujamaa philosophy would encourage students to learn cooperatively, emphasizing intellectual mastery and ethical responsibility to their communities. Through Ujamaa, this paper frames education as a communal enterprise where success is not just a personal achievement but a step forward for the whole community. Beyond amplifying collectivism, Ujamaa fundamentally challenges the structures of dependency entrenched in colonial and postcolonial education systems. The system of education in Canada and many countries remains heavily influenced by Eurocentricism, reinforcing dependence on external frameworks of knowledge production and policies. Ujamaa, by contrast, presents alternative possibilities for an educational system that promotes self-reliance; an education that equips students with the skills, critical consciousness, and ethical sensibilities to sustain and develop their own communities rather than serving external economic interests (Sakata et al., 2021). Nyerere (1968) argued that “education must be a liberating force, enabling people to free themselves from mental colonization and economic subjugation” (p. 316). This principle positions Ujamaa as an anticolonial pedagogical approach that resists the reproduction of dependency by developing autonomous, critically conscious and engaged citizens. The relevance of Ujamaa’s philosophy therefore becomes more pronounced in the context of neoliberal educational policies, which tend to commodify students and reduce education to an instrument of labor market production (Gyamerah et al, 2022). Also, neoliberal governmentality privileges competition, individual success, and the marketization of education and changes students into consumers of knowledge (Giroux, 2014; Lorenzini, 2020). This commodification erodes the social purpose of education as it focuses on

economic efficiency over critical inquiry, collective well-being, and ethical responsibility (Bosio & Waghid, 2023). Ujamaa therefore sketches a powerful framework to subvert normative notions of education that solely privileges the creation workers for a global capitalist economy.

Gesturing Toward Anticolonial Futurities in Canadian K-12 Education

This section outlines the potential contributions of USU in revisioning K-12 education in the Canadian context. It is important to note that while these frameworks are dynamic and have been utilized in various disciplines, this paper takes an interdisciplinary approach and focuses explicitly on how they can provide a new possibility to understand K-12 schooling and classroom engagement, curricula, pedagogies, and assessment practices. Also, in this paper, by engaging in USU, I do not seek to provide a prescriptive solution to the complex challenges faced within K-12 education in the Canadian context. The intent is to open a critical space of relational inquiry wherein we can offer a praxis for imagining the futurities of K-12 education in Canada.

Deconstructing the Curricula to Amplify and Honour Students Voices and Agency

In Canadian K-12 schools, racialized students often navigate curricula that systematically marginalize their voices, histories, and cultural identities (Samra, 2020; Gillies, 2023). Despite widespread rhetoric around equity and inclusion, these students frequently encounter both overt and subtle forms of exclusion through curricula and policies (Tran, 2024; Webb & Mashford-Pringle, 2022). Disciplinary disparities, racial microaggressions, and deficit-based narratives consistently frame racialized students as “at risk” and in need of saving, rather than as intellectual agents and vital contributors to educational and community life (Butler & Abawi, 2021). These exclusions are not incidental. They are ingrained within the colonial and Eurocentric foundations of curricula, which have historically functioned to regulate, assimilate, and render non-Western ways of knowing and being invisible (Kahlon, 2025; Tsang & Eizadirad, 2024). Racialized students are also disproportionately subjected to persistent microaggressions and subtle forms of exclusion that erode their sense of belonging. In predominantly white-dominated schooling environments, racialized students’ cultural practices, languages, and traditions are often ignored or tokenized (Aujla-Bhullar, 2020). Also, some educators often unintentionally hold lower expectations for racialized students, thereby limiting their access to advanced coursework, leadership opportunities, and enrichment programs (Patrick et al., 2020). These everyday colonial practices (Tamale, 2020) subtly communicate that racialized students are outsiders in learning spaces. This undermines students’ confidence, agency, and sense of intellectual worth. K-12 classrooms continue to operate within Eurocentric frameworks that privilege Western knowledge systems while marginalizing the intellectual traditions of Black, Indigenous, and other

racialized communities (Dei et al., 2022; Webb & Mashford-Pringle, 2022). When the histories of these communities are included, they are presented through narratives of victimization (Kendi, 2019). Such framing reinforces the implicit norm that whiteness is the default for knowledge, authority, and innovation, while racialized perspectives remain supplementary or peripheral. Another critical dimension of marginalization lies in how joy, celebration, and relational thriving are sidelined. When culture is reduced to occasional, decontextualized activities, it becomes a commodity rather than a living practice of community. As an alternative, USU reframes culture as relation—an ethic of interdependence (Ubuntu), a commitment to historical consciousness (Sankofa), and a responsibility to collective flourishing (Ujamaa) that reorganizes curriculum around co-creation with youth and their communities. Many K-12 classrooms operate as sites of conformity, where success is measured by how well students adapt to dominant norms rather than by how fully they flourish in their own identities. In response to these intersecting exclusions, USU presents a fundamental reimagining of schools as sites of joy, resistance, and community-rooted learning. Grounded in African philosophies of Afro-humanist relationality, historical consciousness, and collective flourishing, USU disrupts the colonial, capitalist, and individualistic logics that currently shape mainstream curricula (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). More specifically, Ubuntu, with its ethic of “I am because we are,” provides a lens to reframe education as a relational and communal endeavor. Its emphasis on interdependence, empathy, and mutual accountability helps us understand how to challenge exclusions within the educational system. For instance, in a classroom informed by the principles of Ubuntu, peer mentorship, collaborative inquiry, and community-grounded learning are prioritized. Also, Sankofa which calls us to return to the past in order to reclaim what has been forgotten challenges the historical unknowing embedded in curricula (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). A Sankofa-informed approach would position Black, Indigenous, and other racialized histories as central rather than peripheral and embed anti-racist praxis across all disciplines. Further, Ujamaa which is rooted in collective economics and self-determination, reorients the purpose of education away from individual advancement and toward community empowerment. Taken together, USU constitutes a relational and anticolonial framework through which K-12 curriculum might be restructured to center the voices of diverse K-12 students. It is important to note that addressing systemic barriers is only part of the work. However, the critical challenge lies in transforming educational spaces to affirm the full humanity of all students.

Envisioning K-12 Classrooms as sites of Community

To transform the classroom as a communal learning site (Dei, 2005), Canadian K-12 education must move beyond fragmented, surface-level equity and social justice approaches (Ahmed, 2006). As such, instead of seeking a universal answer to fix all social issues, this process involves a structural reimagining of learning that is grounded in collective and

historically conscious practices. This means resisting the temptation to treat culture as interchangeable décor and instead foregrounding community accountability, reciprocity, and students' co-authority over what and how cultural knowledge appears in classrooms (Paris & Alim, 2017). This shift necessitates critical engagement with both pedagogical approaches and the foundational elements that shape the schooling experiences of all students. The USU framework offers a generative lens for reimagining how space, structure, and belonging intersect in classroom environments (Powell et al., 2021).

Moreover, rooted in relational ethics, USU calls for learning environments that promote belonging and interdependence. It also encourages educators to consider critical ontological questions such as, what classroom setup or design enables students to experience themselves as integral to a co-learning community, and what habitual practices must be reconsidered to achieve this? hooks (1994) emphasize that the learning environment is more than a container for content delivery; but as a transgressive process that shapes how knowledge is shared, withheld, or co-created. Furthermore, the physical arrangement of the classroom plays a crucial role in shaping power dynamics. In traditional K–12 classrooms, desks are typically placed in rows facing the teacher. This reinforces a spatial configuration that prioritizes authority and hierarchy (Tarc, 2015). This type of architectural design positions the teacher at the front as the sole distributor of knowledge, while students are situated as passive recipients. Beyond its pedagogical limitations, this arrangement reflects a legacy of discipline and authoritative control which aligns with the historical function of schools as institutions of regulation rather than as spaces of communal engagement (Gulson & Webb, 2018). In a similar vein, decolonial scholar, Maldonado-Torres (2007) argues that schooling structures often enact coloniality, epistemic violence, and structural exclusion through their spatial arrangements and institutionalized hierarchies. Drawing on Ubuntu's ethic of relational humanity, educators might create classrooms that disrupt rigid hierarchies in the classroom. For instance, utilizing circle conversations, storytelling, and reciprocal dialogue during teaching and learning can constitute potential strategies to disrupt power relations. USU presents an alternative perspective. Also, USU conceptualizes education as a shared responsibility and a collective process nurtured in service of communal well-being. Knowledge is thus understood not as a commodity to be owned, but as something held and cultivated through reciprocity and communal agency. A USU-informed classroom promotes student agency and cooperative knowledge production, creating an environment in which learning is not owned but shared, not imposed but co-constructed (Gay, 2018). This way, student success is understood as a continuously emerging process of mutual recognition, co-created meaning, and collective advancement. This orientation transforms the classroom from a site of passive instruction into a space of meaningful collaboration, where students recognize one another as part of an interconnected learning community

rather than as competitors in an isolated academic system (Ryu & Lombardi, 2015). In addition, drawing from Ujamaa's conception of village and familyhood, classrooms can be reimagined as spaces of community and co-learning, as opposed to how current K-12 classrooms in Canada rigidly structure learning environments that stream students into competitive silos. USU gestures towards the creation of spaces where diverse knowledges and lived experiences are acknowledged not as supplemental content, but as relational praxis that influence how learning might unfold. Through USU, diversity is framed as a central component of transformative learning that inspire both an appreciation for and a commitment to collective growth. In the context of Canadian K-12 schooling, this shift also requires the dismantling of structures that sustain preferential treatment for select students. For example, the continued reliance on streaming and tracking practices, categorizing students into labels such as "gifted," "academic," and "applied" reinforces racial and class hierarchies that disproportionately disadvantage historically marginalized students (James & Turner, 2017). The overrepresentation of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students in English Language Learner (ELL) and special education programs further illustrates how systemic barriers shape educational trajectories in ways that are neither neutral nor merit-based (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016). A USU-informed approach does not simply call for equitable distribution within existing categories. It calls for a fundamental reconsideration of these categories as gatekeepers of knowledge and opportunity. It advocates for an educational system that recognizes and nurtures the potential of all students whereby teaching, learning and other classroom conditions are grounded in relationships of trust, mutual care, and shared responsibility.

Conclusion and Implications for Policy and Practice

This paper has traced the enduring legacies of colonialism and neoliberal tendencies embedded in the Canadian K-12 education. The article places emphasis on their material, cultural and symbolic effects on racialized students, particularly those of Black and Afro-diasporic learners within K-12 schooling. Drawing from Ubuntu, Sankofa, and Ujamaa, this paper has sketched a counter-framework that rejects uncomplicated solutions (Andreotti, 2011), quick fixes, or surface-level interventions, but to invites educators and researchers to critically imagine how teaching and learning might be restructured to address the needs of society. As discussed, the potential of USU lies in its capacity to humanize schooling spaces (especially in K-12) not through tokenistic gestures, but through a restructuring of classroom relationships, curricular priorities, and pedagogical commitments. USU makes visible the silences and erasures in current systems while sketching alternative ways of being, knowing, and relating that center interdependence, critical remembrance, and collective responsibility (Gyamerah, 2024).

For policymakers, this requires moving beyond performative equity statements toward structural commitments that address systemic barriers.

This includes dismantling discriminatory tracking practices, re-evaluating assessment tools that perpetuate racial stratification, and investing in community-based, culturally sustaining curriculum development. Policies should support schools in providing learning environments that value students' holistic development. For educators and practitioners, several implications arise. Teaching must be rooted not solely in content delivery but in ethical and communal relationality. Educators should engage in reflexive practices that interrogate their own positionalities, co-create learning experiences with students, and cultivate classroom communities grounded in mutual care. This may involve resisting the isolating logics of meritocracy and reimagining success as a co-constructed, collective process.

In conclusion, this paper contends that invoking USU within Canadian K–12 education is not an act of substituting one theoretical framework for another, but rather an effort to create the conditions necessary for radical belonging, relational accountability, and collective flourishing.. It is a call to remember and re-weave what has been fragmented by colonial schooling systems. As Cree scholar Dwayne Donald (2012) argues, colonialism has fundamentally denied our humanity by denying humanity authentic relationships. Therefore, our efforts toward anti-colonial futurity must begin with the mending of those broken relationships.

Conflict of Interest

N/A

Informed Consent

N/A

Funding Sources

This research received no funding.

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