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## School Social Workers in the Milieu: Ubuntu as a Social Justice Imperative

Lynn Lim  
LAUSD

Johanna C. Baez  
Columbia University School of Social Work, jc2515@columbia.edu

Meghan Gabriel Pataky  
Jefferson Center for Mental Health

*See next page for additional authors*

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## School Social Workers in the Milieu: Ubuntu as a Social Justice Imperative

### Abstract

Supporting community resilience throughout the milieu, or school community, is a social justice imperative in providing trauma-informed approaches in education. More school social workers need to view their work as a community-level intervention with a trauma-informed approach that includes collaborating with students and staff throughout the building and within the neighboring community. This conceptual article will explore the humanistic concepts of the milieu as a focus of intervention and the South African value of *ubuntu*, our interconnectedness, through the lens of school social work. The milieu is a humanistic principle in which the community works together to support each other. For school social work, the milieu is not just providing one-on-one counseling in our individual offices, but also working throughout the school building and community by collaborating with teachers, supporting transition times between classes, and spearheading community meetings. *Ubuntu* is seen as the essence of being human and promoting our interconnectedness, as a person is a person through other people. School social work that promotes *ubuntu* holds empathy at the forefront and prioritizes connections and supporting others. In South Africa, the *ubuntu* philosophy has been used to heal national trauma after the Apartheid and many South African schools support *ubuntu* through their principles within the school community. These concepts work together to support community resilience and need to be a part of key practices in global trauma-informed education. These practices will be explored through school-based case examples across the United States and in South Africa. Lastly, recommendations will be provided for how school social workers can use these practices in their schools.

### Keywords

school social work, social justice, trauma-informed, milieu, ubuntu

### Authors

Lynn Lim, Johanna C. Baez, Meghan Gabriel Pataky, Ellen Wilder, and Hester Wilhelmina van Sittert

## **School Social Workers in the Milieu: *Ubuntu* as a Social Justice Imperative**

School social workers can be a crucial part in building resilient schools that prioritize community and collaboration. The South African concept of *ubuntu*, our interconnectedness (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013), and the use of the milieu, in which the community works together as an intervention (Abroms, 1969), provides a needed framework for school social workers to center community resilience as a social justice imperative. Through a practice checklist and case examples, this paper explores how the philosophy of *ubuntu* and the milieu can be a powerful intervention and framework in global trauma-informed school social work practice.

Although *ubuntu* is a widely utilized concept in African social work (Department of Welfare, 1997), the United States based authors have become passionate about incorporating *ubuntu* and the milieu into school-based settings to support trauma-informed care. Trauma-informed practice in schools acknowledge and address the social-emotional needs of students who have experienced traumatic events which can impact their ability to function in the classroom (Thomas et al., 2019). By incorporating the *ubuntu* and milieu framework with trauma-informed interventions, school social workers are able to engage in prevention, create unity, and focus on community building within and outside the school. This framework fosters a school community in which students feel seen, cared for, and uplifted, while not being re-traumatized.

Social workers must also promote anti-racist education and action within these frameworks in order to dismantle systems of white supremacy in school communities (Kendi, 2019). Within these frameworks, school social workers can engage students and the entire school community in anti-racist initiatives that identify and take action against racism, discrimination and systemic oppression. By centering anti-racist and relational practices throughout a school, social workers can support human rights values (Du Preez & Roux, 2010) such as interconnectedness, rather than focus on school discipline that disproportionately affects Black, Indigenous, and students of color (Skiba et al., 2011). The use of *ubuntu* and the milieu can assist in developing a more positive school climate along with spaces for students to feel respected and heard within their school communities.

### **History of the Development with Wediko Children's Services**

As practice frameworks, *ubuntu* and the milieu were introduced to several of the authors while working at a summer youth residential program at the non-profit Wediko Children's Services. The Wediko summer program is a 45-day residential program in operation since 1934 that supports children with emotional

and behavioral challenges. Dr. Tod Rossi, a former summer program director, brought the framework of *ubuntu* to the program in 2005 upon learning about it in South Africa during his work with the Truth and Reconciliation Program. During an interview with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Dr. Rossi inquired about how *ubuntu* can be used in schools and residential programs, to which Archbishop Tutu offered the sage words that the practices of *ubuntu* can be brought to our schools and taught as “my humanity is inextricably bound up with yours” (Rossi, 2009). *Ubuntu* is a keyword used to encourage and recognize the importance of helping each other, using empathy, and creating a strong culture of kindness and understanding.

The use of the milieu was introduced to Wediko early in its history by Dr. Robert Young and his colleagues who wanted to create an outdoor oasis for children with emotional and psychiatric needs (Wediko, 2020). This framework was continued forward by Dr. Harry W. Parad, the former Executive Director of Wediko (Wediko, 2014). The milieu is viewed as a powerful vehicle in using the group and the larger environment to make change towards the individual well-being for each child. *Ubuntu* and the milieu work together synergistically to create a space where more change and hope is possible for struggling youth.

### **Defining *Ubuntu***

*Ubuntu* is an African philosophy that highlights humanism or humanness and is recognized throughout the African continent. It focuses on the connection humans have with one another and the community that develops with it. The phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* represents the *ubuntu* spirit and can be translated to “people are people through other people” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998, p. 127). It has also been described as “I am because of who we all are” (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013, p. 83). *Ubuntu* is a nguni Bantu term originating in Sub-Saharan Africa; however, multiple African languages and societies have their own word to describe this concept: e.g. *gimuntu* (Angola), *muthu* (Botswana), *maaya* (Burkina Faso), *bato* (Cameroon), *umunthu* (Malawi), and *omundu* (Namibia) (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). *Ubuntu* encompasses many values that can be described as humanness, compassion, caring, empathy, respect, resilience, mutual recognition, dignity, humility, and others (Msila, 2008; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Shepherd & Mhlanga, 2014).

Though *ubuntu* is an old African philosophy, in 1995, it was re-invigorated in South Africa at the end of apartheid by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998). The Commission attempted to use *ubuntu* as a benign way to heal national trauma and develop unity amongst the South African people (Abdullah, 2016). Specifically, the TRC Report addressed “principles that could facilitate communal change including forgiveness, reconciliation, restorative justice, *ubuntu*, utilizing traditional healing systems, reparation, and advancing social redress through adequate resource

allocation and service provision” (Abdullah, 2016, p. 9). Archbishop Tutu was a strong advocate for advancing this concept forward during The Commission and onward as a way to develop resilience and as a social ethic that should be utilized (Tutu as cited in Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). The *ubuntu* philosophy has been applied to businesses, politics, education, technology, social work, spirituality, art, and literature. It is a concept that can be adapted and utilized in a multitude of ways to highlight the importance of humanness, kindness, and respect towards one another.

*Ubuntu* emphasizes the community as greater than the individual itself, representing the need to support one another. Wilson and Williams (2013) uses the African axiom “one’s humanity is made possible through the humanity of others” (p. 82) to further explain “that every person and every life is recognized through their connection, consciousness, and competency in their relation with other people with emphasis on understanding, collaboration, and partnership” (pp. 82-83). *Ubuntu* aims to create an environment where there is a sense of belonging and a deeper meaning to the larger group. It highlights what it means to be a human and to support other humans. This concept addresses the collectivist nature of many eastern cultures and can be seen as a direct challenge to the individualism often found in western ideology. However, the words used to describe *ubuntu* are values understood and acknowledged regardless of language, culture, or customs.

### ***Ubuntu* in School Social Work Practice**

Although *ubuntu* is a concept that challenges many western ideologies and psychological theories (Wilson & Williams, 2013), it aligns closely with social work worldwide. The very essence of *ubuntu* embodies many social work values. The International Federation of Social Workers (2014) has set forth a global definition for the profession and includes the following principles: “respect for the inherent worth and dignity of human beings, doing no harm, respect for diversity and upholding human rights and social justice” (Principles). These values can be described through the term *ubuntu*, and in some African countries, it is written into the code of ethics and principles for social workers.

The Zimbabwe Social Workers Code of Ethics includes *ubuntu*, describing it as an “emphasis on values of human solidarity, empathy, human dignity and the humaneness in every person, and that holds that a person is a person through others” (Council of Social Workers, 2012, p. 1026). In the White Paper for Social Welfare of 1997, the South African government also includes *ubuntu* as one of the guiding principles when developing social welfare policies and programs (Department of Welfare, 1997). Although the term is not specifically used in the United States of America, the values of *ubuntu* are reflected in the social work code of ethics: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (National Association of Social

Workers [NASW], 2017). The *ubuntu* term captures what the profession of social work attempts to provide and create for those they serve.

In addition to the overall value of *ubuntu* within social work, it has been incorporated in multiple South African school contexts. Msila (2008, 2009) has explored the impact of an *ubuntu* focused curriculum in building community and empathy amongst students; and, how *ubuntu* can be utilized as a management strategy by school leadership to assist in enhancing morale amongst teachers and empower a struggling school. McCluskey and Lephala (2010) utilized *ubuntu* philosophy and restorative approaches as a way to challenge the current discipline structures towards students in the United Kingdom and South Africa. *Ubuntu* can be used as a tool for school social workers to create community and empowerment within the whole school environment, linking all teachers, students, administrators, and staff together.

### **Defining Milieu**

Milieu is the French word for a person's social environment. In residential and inpatient programs, milieu therapy involves therapeutic communities that use the environment to support positive change, such as providing clear and consistent structure, group expectations, and working together as a group to solve problems and provide support (Green, 2018). Milieu therapy and its importance can be traced back to the early 1950s with scholars finding benefits in treating mental health conditions using social groups (Murray & Cohen, 1959). This model uses the community to support healing that has historically been a key piece found in many cultures across the globe.

Abroms (1969) defines milieu therapy "as the means of organizing a community treatment environment so that every human interaction and every treatment technique can be systematically utilized to further the patients' aims of controlling symptomatic behaviors and learning appropriate psychosocial skills" (p. 557). The milieu creates a space to improve the lives of clients through working together, "typically described as a humanistic, permissive, reality-oriented, democratic, living learning situation" (Abroms, 1969, p. 553). The power of the collective space provides support to address problematic behaviors and increase positive psychosocial skills.

### **Milieu in School Social Work Practice**

School environments represent a milieu group in which social workers can practice and provide therapeutic services. In connecting milieu treatment within a school, this work can support community interventions such as Tier 1 universal interventions (e.g., school-wide positive expectations, consistent classroom routines) and Tier 2 small group interventions (e.g., check-in, check-out programs, focused social emotional learning instruction). Milieu work can include school

social workers working with the entire school body as a collective group to create new school climate standards or working to build individual relationships with students during the lunch hour. While many school social workers are a part of a school's Tier 1 and Tier 2 initiatives; oftentimes, the school social worker's role is in the office mostly providing Tier 3 interventions such as one-on-one or small group counseling. Working in the school community (e.g., in classrooms, hallways, school sidewalks), allows school social workers to also intervene proactively in Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions.

Few articles discuss specifically how the milieu is used within school social work practice. On the topic of counseling relationships within a school, Blair (1999) expresses the need to recognize and work within the school milieu by establishing alliances not only with identified students, but with teachers, staff, and other administrators in order to provide the most effective interventions within that school environment. Working in the milieu allows school social workers to center support for students not only in their individual sessions, but also within and outside the classroom with teachers, staff, and the larger community and neighborhood. This creates relationship building amongst teachers, students, and staff by strengthening the school community to best support the student's needs.

School social workers who utilize the milieu create groups of support and view all interactions as supporting social and emotional development. Milieu support can include direct student interactions such as meeting students in the lunch room or in the classroom, on the playground for quick check-ins, or assisting with transitions. It can also include joining or creating existing parent or teacher support groups, establishing relationships with the nearby community partners, and providing professional development training. Utilizing the school milieu as a therapeutic intervention fosters community resilience and creates a space where support can be found on multiple levels.

### ***Ubuntu* and Milieu School Social Work: Framework and Practice Checklist**

*Ubuntu* and the milieu are closely connected and form a framework for trauma-informed practice that can be embedded into the ecological systems model—a foundation for many school social workers. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory addresses the importance of viewing how an individual's environment (e.g., micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems) impacts their development and experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This concept can be adapted in a way to specifically represent the school environment. An example of this would depict the student at the center of the model, the closest level being the student's friends, teachers, and family, then other school staff and peers connected with the student, followed by the student's extended family, community members, school neighborhood, and school board. The outermost level can address the student's

culture, history, education policy of the area, spirituality, and faith. Each of these levels support and/or impact the student's ability to be successful in the school setting.

Implementing the *ubuntu* and milieu framework means incorporating the value of *ubuntu* and using the milieu as an intervention in each level of the adapted ecological model. By thinking of the multiple layers within the adapted school ecological model, school social workers can play a key part in integrating *ubuntu* in interventions that focus on students, their support networks, and the larger school community. In this framework, *ubuntu* drives each of the systemic interactions and honors the complex systems within an individual student (e.g., their cultural and ethnic group belonging, family, peers, neighborhood, etc.). Social workers focus on the relationship and support students' multiple group identities as a way to empower and support change. Additionally, this framework encourages school social workers to use different systems and groups to enact change, such as partnering with a school student peer mediator group or even a student council group to support social and emotional initiatives. Because the milieu allows the social worker to create an impact at multiple systemic levels, they are also able to be influential in reflecting *ubuntu*, or humanness, throughout the school system. The value of *ubuntu* and the use of milieu interventions are trauma-informed as they recognize and address the intricacies of each individual's experiences and needs.

The practice of *ubuntu* and milieu can be represented within various systems of a school, including direct student support, networks of support (e.g., family, teachers, peers), and the greater community (e.g., neighborhood, culture, systemic structures). This framework is a shift from a traditional outpatient therapy model to empower social workers to engage the many voices that are built-in to the school community and how bringing these together can create a more resilient, trauma-informed, anti-racist, and socially just school.

Guiding principles when working with the milieu and *ubuntu* include using a community-oriented whole systems approach, responding to students in the here and now, working collaboratively with students and their support networks, using relational practices, and utilizing a strengths-based approach. These principles highlight the interpersonal dynamics found in the value of *ubuntu* along with the systems perspective identified with milieu work. *Figure 1* is a checklist that outlines specific actions based on these principles school social workers can use to utilize the *ubuntu* and milieu framework in their own schools. Each action item often encompasses more than one guiding principle, such as when school social workers "develop relationships with school staff, caregivers, and family members" they are "engaging support networks" that is a community-oriented whole systems approach, and also uses relational and strengths-based approaches.



**Figure 1**

***Ubuntu in the Milieu: A Practice Checklist***

School social workers can utilize the ubuntu and milieu framework through:

<b>Providing Direct Student Support</b>	
	Join students in the classroom for continued academic learning
	Join students in social environments for continued social-emotional learning
	Transition with students from one activity to the next
	Provide on-the-spot feedback to promote positive actions and to address problematic behaviors
	Intervene proactively before behaviors escalate to disciplinary responses or actions
	Validate positive student choices, highlight student successes
	Support student social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth
	Greet students upon arrival and departure
<b>Engaging Support Networks</b>	
	Model for school staff members ways to respond to student social-emotional needs
	Offer breaks or assistance to staff members
	Develop relationships with school staff, caregivers, and family members
	Provide school-wide professional development for staff to understand the <i>ubuntu</i> and milieu model
	Offer support for the larger peer group, not just identified students
	Participate in school committees that impact whole school culture
	Create, develop, and provide explicit whole school expectations and community values
<b>Building Community, Neighborhood, and Culture</b>	
	Be available at drop-off and pick-up to build relationships with student families

	Walk with students to the street corners around the school
	Establish relationships with surrounding community partners where students spend time before and after school (e.g. restaurants, retail shops, etc.)
	Engage in anti-racism work and addressing cultural competence and humility within the school
	Utilize trauma-informed practices to acknowledge our own biases and dismantle systemic forms of oppression within the school community

### School Social Work Case Examples of *Ubuntu* and the Milieu

#### *Ubuntu* School Social Work Case Example

In asking several school social workers from South Africa, they all agreed the *ubuntu* principle is honored through school social work practices and their own unique values within their school of practice. At the High School for Girls Potchefstroom under the leadership of School Principal, Ms. Gwendoline Duganzich, *ubuntu* is observed through the following school-wide values shared directly from the school:

- **Pride:** To foster a sense of dignity and self-worth. To be proud of who you are, your personal achievements and our school.
- **Respect:** To honor the unique qualities that each student and staff member brings to the school. To show respect, at all times, for oneself, others, human rights, and the environment.
- **Integrity:** To show honesty, sincerity, truthfulness and fairness in all dealings with others.
- **Diligence:** To embrace, show motivation, perseverance and a willingness to work through adversity. To have confidence in your ability to achieve our personal best.
- **Empathy:** To understand the feeling of others based on our understanding of their inherent dignity and rights.

At the High School for Girls Potchefstroom, everyone counts. At school, personalities are formed and lifelong friendships are born and nourished in a safe, stable, and warm environment. The school is proud of traditions and staff know they are part of a bigger picture. The school takes pride in serving their community through different projects, and through this lens, the school adheres to the principle of *ubuntu*. There is the tradition of knitting strips to make blankets, which are distributed to those in need. Mandela Week is embraced, where every class fulfills 67 minutes of service to others and in the community. Service and charity also play

a significant role in the life of students at this school. On Monday mornings, charity is collected by means of the girls' pocket money, which they contribute voluntarily. The money is then used at the end of the school year to buy necessities for welfare organizations (NGOs) to distribute to children in need. *Ubuntu*, in the form of prioritizing relationships and connecting with the community, is evident throughout this case example.

### **Milieu School Social Work Case Example**

A case example from a school social worker in a middle school helps to illustrate the growth that is possible when school social workers embrace a milieu framework. For this school social worker, most of her time was spent in her social work office and she typically interacted with students while facilitating individual and group therapy, providing case management, and supporting students during mental health crises. When asked to intervene in ways that did not match her understanding of what social work should look like, she felt frustrated and undervalued. Such tasks included behavior interventions, lunch and crosswalk duties, and hallway monitoring. In discussing her frustrations in supervision with her LCSW supervisor, she learned that in the milieu, the entire community supports the student in broad, diverse ways. She was encouraged to immerse herself wherever and whenever she could in the school community. Rather than try to make every student action fit into a limited idea of what clinical social work looks like, she learned to utilize the community and build relationships, and in turn her work with her students deepened. This simple yet significant reframe increased her satisfaction at work and helped her meet people from their view and life.

By broadening her clinical practice to include the milieu, she became more effective in supporting students and her school community at large. Whereas lunch and crosswalk duties previously felt like a distraction from her social work interventions, she learned how to proactively support students in these settings. Keeping the milieu in mind, she became purposeful in getting to know and supporting all students she encountered throughout the school day, rather than just the ones who sought her out when they were in distress. The milieu shifted her practice from reactive to proactive, as well as broadened her impact on campus.

For example, when she learned the art teacher was having a hard time with his class, she came in to join the students and help those who were having trouble focusing. One student had been out of his seat and teasing his friends when the school social worker walked in, and instead of asking him to come to her office, she joined him at his table and asked him what he was working on. The student appeared excited while showing his artwork and visibly calmed down enough to be able to focus on the assignment while they talked. This experience helped the student successfully stay in the classroom and provided an opportunity for him to be seen in a different, more positive light. The overwhelmed art teacher also felt

supported, which served as a starting point for trust and rapport with the student. Over time, this school social worker became more integrated into the school community. Students and staff saw her in a multidimensional way once she expanded her practice from her office to the campus at large, and she was able to see and support them in more holistic ways too. These are examples of a milieu practice because the social worker views all interactions as an opportunity to promote positive change and engages with the entire school community to support healing.

### **Putting Theory into Practice: *Ubuntu* and Milieu in School Social Work**

The practice checklist and case examples provide specific ways on how school social workers can utilize *ubuntu* and the milieu within their schools. The skills outlined in the checklist allow social workers to move from the micro to the macro, targeting direct student support, engaging support networks, and building community within the school setting. These interventions help build and promote proactive responses, community resilience, and humanness through respect for all.

The direct student interventions in the checklist allow school social workers to see firsthand how a student interacts with peers, their environment, and other adults in the school. By joining the students, the school social worker is able to gather information and support “in the moment” clinical interventions. Through utilization of the classroom and school milieu, students are supported throughout the day in their school community, rather than being identified as the “problem student” who must be removed from class to be supported. This use of the classroom milieu has been found to be a significant factor in creating a positive school climate (Baker, 1998), allowing for increased rapport and more information sharing between students and school social workers.

Social workers can also empower and engage the student’s close support network (e.g. teachers, family, peers, etc.) and the larger school setting through this framework. Social workers gain understanding of the social dynamics, current events and relationships, and develop a system in which no one staff/faculty member is stretched too thin or working outside their level of tolerance. Trust and relationship strengthen through this practice. When students feel supported by those within their school environment, they are more likely to develop stronger social bonds and a positive connection to the school (Stewart, 2003). Participation and support of whole school culture interventions such as Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) can focus on prevention within all classrooms (Sugai et al., 2000). This can reduce the use of disciplinary actions and school police intervention. School police response can be traumatic for students, especially students of color who are already marginalized by police presence.

The reduction of this type of intervention can then decrease the traumatic effects school systems can have on students.

School social workers must also engage in anti-racism work and deepen their understanding of how to effectively implement trauma-informed practices within the school, including developing cultural competence and humility. To effectively support trauma-exposed youth, social workers must recognize and learn the cultural and historical contexts that have led to the racial injustices and inequalities present in a student's school and community (Alvarez, 2020). It is imperative for the school social worker to acknowledge and actively work to dismantle the systems that produce trauma and those who are affected by those systems, including the education systems in which students are functioning. For example, school social workers can take an active role in supporting school staff in understanding anti-racist approaches by addressing anti-Black racism and the injustices that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline for Black, Indigenous, and students of color. School social workers can support these vital efforts by advocating for students who are experiencing oppression and racism, providing data on racial disparities to administration, and leading school-wide efforts to provide education and take action steps in undoing racism.

### **Challenges and Recommendations**

It is clear schools and school social workers often struggle with the ever-changing focus of new initiatives, known as initiative fatigue (Reeves, 2010). The “new best thing” is often added to the ever-growing list of tasks and expectations that can easily lead to burnout (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). *Ubuntu* and the milieu are not another set of initiatives, but an overarching framework that previous initiatives can fit under. This is a frameshift in viewing each school's current initiatives or priorities through the lens of community, collaboration, and relational practices.

In thinking through ways to move from just another professional development initiative to actual implementation, it is important to consider how you can create buy-in from school communities and explain this framework as a time-saving approach. It is understood that many school social workers are overwhelmed by the need to complete required paperwork and provide interventions for high-needs students, including students requiring Tier 3 interventions. Increasing interventions in the milieu can ultimately decrease time spent on providing the higher level of intervention often required in one-on-one settings, because they can reach more students (e.g. short here-and-now interventions in the cafeteria, or on the playground) and be proactive in providing needed interventions before a problem comes up. Further, using the relational practices of *ubuntu* can accelerate the development of the therapeutic relationship, which aids in making positive changes (Blatt et al., 2010).

A recommendation for introducing the concepts of *ubuntu* and the milieu is to think about ways to support the initial implementation phase based on implementation science, with a focus on staff selection, training, coaching, and systems interventions (Fixen et al., 2009). For staff selection, newly hired school social workers can be targeted to provide initial conversations during the interview process that include the framework of *ubuntu* and the milieu and how this framework is different from the more traditional one-on-one therapy model. School social workers can then be selected based on their level of understanding in community and relational approaches. Training can also be provided on this framework with school champions providing professional development opportunities. Coaching can be provided by those school champions or in supervision where social workers can explore the concepts of *ubuntu* and the milieu and how they are using these ideas in their daily work. Lastly, systems interventions could include involving the school's administration in some pieces of the *ubuntu* and milieu framework, such as coordinating staff groups to greet students upon arrival or working with administration to understand which pieces of the checklist are most important to the school's leadership.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, utilizing the philosophies of *ubuntu* and the milieu in school social work practices promotes student and community support. Integrating these frameworks into clinical interventions is a shift that empowers the school social worker to center student and community support. The ecological model of a school system can be helpful in understanding how *ubuntu* and the milieu centers the community in every level of support in a school, ranging from micro to macro interventions. The checklist can be beneficial for school social workers wanting to implement *ubuntu* and milieu practices, though research is needed to validate the checklist and benefits. In conclusion, it is recommended that these frameworks are utilized as powerful interventions for trauma-informed and social justice focused support in every school community.

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