African philosophy and the transformation of educational discourse in South Africa

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Abstract

The liberation of Africa and its peoples from centuries of racially discriminatory colonial rule and domination has far reaching implications for educational thought and practice. The transformation of educational discourse in South Africa requires a philosophical framework that respects diversity, acknowledges lived experience and challenges the hegemony of Western forms of universal knowledge. In this article I argue that African philosophy, as a system of African knowledge(s), can provide a useful philosophical framework for the construction of empowering knowledge that will enable communities in South Africa to participate in their own educational development.

Introduction

Philosophical discourse in South Africa about the nature of education, teaching and learning has always been fragmented. Traditionally, there have been those educationists who have worked within the context of a Marxist and neo-Marxist paradigm, while others have located themselves within the more general context of what may loosely be termed "democratic liberalism" which propagates the democratising of schooling and individual empowerment. Then there have also been those who have pursued their endeavours in the analytical philosophy of education tradition emanating from the Institute of Education at the University of London. In other quarters, educationists adopted a Doeyweerdian frame of reference for a philosophical discourse on educational matters. However, during the so-called apartheid years, philosophical discourse about the nature of education, teaching and learning was dominated by Fundamental Pedagogics which was seen to provide the foundational landscape for apartheid education in the form of the system of Christian National Education. As such, Fundamental Pedagogics was regarded as a crucial element in the hegemony of apartheid education as it revealed itself in

the system of Christian National Education (see, for example Higgs 1994,1995).

With the dismantling of apartheid and the abandoning of the system of Christian National Education it became necessary, however, to formulate, or at least begin formulating, a new philosophical discourse in education. But what should constitute such a re-vision of philosophical discourse in education? In this article, I argue for the introduction of an African discourse into the conversation surrounding the re-vision of philosophy of education in South Africa. Such a discourse will have reference to that spoken tradition and body of literature referred to as African philosophy. The role of this philosophical corpus is seen by many, for example, Diop (1996), and Diop (2000), as creating a new foundation and social fabric with the capacity to harness an ethos and intellectual production among African people as agents of their own humanity and collective progress.

Much of the history of Africa, and for that matter South Africa, has been dominated by colonial occupation. According to Ramose (2002), colonialism in Africa provided the framework for the organised subjugation of the cultural, scientific and economic life of many on the African continent. This subjugation ignored indigenous knowledge systems and impacted on African people's way of seeing and acting in the world. In fact, African identity, to all intents and purposes, became an inverted mirror of Western Eurocentric identity. This state of affairs gave birth to numerous attempts to reassert distinctively African ways of thinking and of relating to the world. Such attempts are located in the call for an African Renaissance.

The African Renaissance and educational discourse

The call for an African Renaissance has been present in the period marking the nearly four decades of African post-independence (see, Diop 1996, Maloka 2000, Muiu and Martin 2002). The process of decolonisation that unfolded during this period saw Africa assert its right to define itself within its own African context in the attainment of independence. Wa Thiango (1993) claims that independence was about people's struggle to claim their own space, and their right to name the world for themselves, rather than be named through the colour-tinted glass of the Europeans. In the context of education, Hoppers (2001, p.1) describes this continuing struggle in the following way:

> The African voice in education at the end of the twentieth century is the voice of the radical witness of the pain and inhumanity of history, the arrogance of modernisation and the conspiracy of silence in academic disciplines towards what is organic and alive in Africa. It is the voice of 'wounded healers' struggling against many odds to remember the past, engage with the present, and determine a future built on new foundations. It invokes the democratic ideal of the right of all to 'be', to 'exist', to grow and live without coercion, and from that to find a point of convergence with the numerous others. It exposes the established hegemony of Western thought, and beseeches it to feel a measure of shame and vulgarity at espousing modes of development that build on the silencing of all other views and perceptions of reality. It also seeks to make a contribution to the momentum for a return of humanism to the centre of the educational agenda, and dares educators to see the African child-learner not as a bundle of Pavlovian reflexes, but as human being culturally and cosmologically located in authentic value systems.

What is meant by an the African Renaissance in educational discourse is, therefore, founded on the perception that the overall character of much of educational theory and practice in Africa is overwhelmingly either European or Eurocentric. In other words, it is argued by advocates of an African Renaissance in educational discourse, such as, Teffo (2000), Vilakazi (2000), and Seepe (2001b) that much of what is taken for education in Africa is in fact not African, but rather a reflection of Europe in Africa. The African Renaissance has also, taken on a much greater significance in recent days with the call for the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems by scholars such as Hoppers (1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c) and Seepe (2001a, 2001b). The inference here is the distorted view that Africans possess little or no indigenous knowledge of value that can be utilized in the process of educational transformation. This same inference also presupposes, it is argued by protagonists of an African Renaissance in educational discourse, that the norm for educational achievement and success for African children and students is that of Western European capitalist elitist culture, where the English language is sacralized, and internalization of bourgeois European values is seen as the index of progress. And it is in response to this state of affairs, that the call for an African Renaissance in educational discourse goes out, a call which insists that all critical and transformative educators in Africa embrace an indigenous African world view and root their nation's educational paradigms in an indigenous socio-cultural and epistemological framework. This implies that all educational curricula in Africa should have Africa as their focus, and as a result be indigenous-grounded and orientated. Failure to do so, it is argued, will mean that education becomes alien, oppressive and irrelevant, as is seen to be the case with the legacy of colonial and neo-colonial education systems in Africa, including South Africa.

The call for an African Renaissance in educational discourse, therefore, seeks to demonstrate how indigenous African philosophies can be tapped as a foundational resource for the socio-educational transformation of the African continent, and also how indigenous philosophies can be politically and economically liberating. This means that by virtue of assuming the indigeneity of culture, the call for an African Renaissance in educational discourse does not connote a detachment from political radicalization and mobilization. In short, it would claim that the influence of Western Eurocentric culture on Africans, needs to be forcefully arrested by all critically conscious African educators in the struggle for the establishment of an African identity in educational discourse.

I now turn my attention to the contribution made by African philosophy to the establishment of such an African identity, and explore the possible framework that African philosophy can provide for the construction of empowering knowledge that will enable communities in South Africa to participate in their own educational development.

African philosophy and the problem of an African identity

The question of an indigenous African knowledge system, that is, of an African philosophy with a distinctive African epistemic identity is not unproblematic. In the light of Africa's colonial legacy, African philosophy is confronted with the problem of establishing its own unique African order of knowledge. The attempt to establish a distinctively African epistemic identity within the discipline of philosophy has brought into question what it means to be 'an African', and what it means to be 'a philosopher'.

The question of what meaning we attach to the adjective 'African' when we talk about 'African philosophy' is a crucial debate in attempts at establishing a uniquely African order of knowledge. Some African philosophers, for example, Mudimbe (1988) and Hountondji (1983,1985), regard an intellectual product as African simply because it is produced or promoted by Africans. They, therefore, adopt a geographical criterion in their definition of the term 'African' in 'African philosophy' in that they regard African philosophy as the contributions of Africans practising philosophy within the defined framework of the discipline and its historical traditions.

But then another criterion, referred to as the cultural criterion, is also used to determine was is meant by 'African' in African philosophy. According to this criterion, a philosophical work is 'African' if it directs its attention to issues concerning the theoretical or conceptual underpinnings of African culture. Such a view is clearly presented by Gyekye (1987, p.72) when he writes: "Philosophy is a cultural phenomenon in that philosophical thought is grounded in cultural experience." According to this view, then, the study of the traditional African world in terms of views, ideas, and conceptions represents the unique substance of African philosophy and legitimates reference to what is referred to as African philosophy.

With regard to the term "philosophy", two conceptions of philosophy have become prominent in debates about the idea of African philosophy. First is the definition of philosophy as a rational, critical activity. Those who adopt this definition of philosophy, for example, Appiah (1989a), Oruka (1990), Bodunrin (1985), Oladipo (1989), Wiredu (1989, 1996) and Hountondji (1983, 1985), frown at the attempt to equate African philosophy with traditional African world-views. In doing so, they make a distinction between philosophy in the popular sense, and philosophy in the academic sense. In the first instance, philosophy is regarded as being concerned with traditional African world-views whereas, in an academic sense, philosophy is a theoretical discipline like, for example, physics, algebra and linguistics with its own distinctive problems and methods. Scholars in Africa who view philosophy in this academic sense are referred to as universalist African philosophers because they emphasise reason as a universal human phenomenon. There are, however, other African philosophers such as, Anyanwu (1989), Gyekye (1989, 1997), More (1996), Motshega (1999), Mbiti (1970), Kaphagawani (1998) and Kwame (1992) who maintain that traditional African world-views constitute an authentic African philosophy. They insist on a definition of philosophy that is broad enough to accommodate these world-views. Recourse to traditional African world-views is taken up in the practice of what is called ethnophilosophy.

The two conceptions of philosophy that have become prominent in debates about the idea of African philosophy are thus marked by:

• those who insist on a strict definition of philosophy on a purity of form; they are out to defend the professional integrity of their discipline against the popularisation by cultural nationalists

- those who give a rather broad definition of philosophy and emphasise the specificity of the content of whatever is produced by African philosophers in the practice of ethnophilosophy.

The concern with definitions of, be they definitions of 'African' or 'philosophy' is considered by some, for example, Oladipo (1992) and Appiah (1989b) to be misguided and distracting. Oladipo (1992) argues that there are no definitions that capture the essence of either the terms 'African' or 'philosophy'. No one definition can be credited with a universal application, because both these terms are linked with a social history that impacts upon their meaning. In responding to the preoccupation with definition Appiah (1989b, p.12) points out that:

> There are ..... other issues for philosophers in Africa to explore now, which require not preliminary anxieties as to whether our work fits existing labels but confident examinations of some of the questions for which our training happens to have equipped us.

In the light of these remarks it would seem that the problem surrounding African philosophy is not the problem of anything meeting the criteria for being both 'African' and 'philosophical'. Rather it is the problem of the extent to which African philosophers have been able to put their intellect in the service of the struggle and destiny of Africans. In other words, the issue is not that of whether a contributor to a debate is African-born or whether the question under consideration is authentically African in the cultural sense. It is not even the issue of whether what they are doing is pure philosophy, applied philosophy, ethnophilosophy, social criticism or whatever. Rather, in the words of Oladipo (1992, p.24):

> ... it is the issue of the extent to which African philosophers have been able to use whatever intellectual skills they possess to illuminate the various dimensions of the African predicament.

This sentiment is taken up in part by African scholars, such as, Serequeberhan (1994), who adopt a hermeneutical perspective on African philosophy in African philosophy. Rooting themselves in what is traditional to Africa, they seek to escape an enslavement to the past by using that past to open up the future. They contend that philosophy properly construed must move beyond a preoccupation with universalist abstractions and ethnological considerations and call into question the real relations of power in Africa. In this regard, Serequeberhan (1994, p.43) states that:

> The discourse of African philosophy is indirectly and historically linked to the demise of European hegemony (colonialism and neocolonialism) and is aimed at fulfilling/completing this demise. It is a reflective and critical effort to rethink the indigenised African situation beyond the confines of Eurocentric concepts and categories.

To appreciate the distinctive features of African philosophy, it is also helpful to compare its method and execution with other systems of philosophy. Appiah (1992) elucidates the difference between African and Western philosophy being mindful of the condescending attitude of the West towards Africa. For Appiah, the West considers the issue of what philosophy is 'for' - that is, its social meaning and relevance - with intellectual and academic contempt. Undoubtedly, the West does philosophize in a different style and method from Africa, although this may be attributed to enormous resources and funding. The West is concerned with perfecting philosophical discourse for its own sake, while Africa wants to use philosophy in a particular sense to address social issues, including the nature of a distinctively African education discourse.

Central to the issue of philosophy in Africa is the question of relevance and usefulness. Africa, perhaps owing to its level of development at this point, wants philosophy to contribute towards the political, economic, ethical and general upliftment of the people. In Africa, philosophy is expected to be pragmatic and to render a 'service'. It must contribute effectively towards the amelioration of the human condition, the lived and existing human condition. Wiredu (as quoted by Anyanwu 1989, p.127) concludes: "... we will only solve our problems if we see them as human problems arising out of a special situation". Thus, Anyanwu (1989, p.127) affirms that African philosophy "invites people to take a stand on the issue of reality as experienced." This experience of an African reality gives rise to a sense of commonality in an enunciation of an indigenous African knowledge system which finds expression in certain general themes in African philosophy.

General themes in African philosophy

Despite the diversity and extraordinary dynamism of the African continent as emphasised by Appiah (1997), it is argued by many (see, for example, Asante and Asante, 1990; Gyekye, 1997) that there are commonalities that unite the African experience. In the words of Diop (1962, p.7), "... there is a profound cultural unity still alive beneath the deceptive appearance of cultural

heterogeneity present in Africa which gives rise to the contents of an indigenous African knowledge system."

What, then, has African philosophy, as an indigenous African knowledge system, to say about a distinctively African experience of life? Letseka (2000) highlights the following commonalities in the African experience of life that are addressed as general themes in African philosophy: African communalism and the notion of "ubuntu".

According to Letseka (2000) the importance of communality to traditional African life cannot be overemphasized. This is because community and belonging to a community of people constitute the very fabric of traditional African life. Unlike the Western liberal notion of the individual as some sort of entity that is capable of existing and flourishing on its own, unconnected to any community of other individuals, not bound by any biological relationships or socioeconomic, political and cultural relationships, obligations, duties, responsibilities and conventions that frame and define any community of individuals, the communal conception of the individual in most traditional African settings is described by Mbiti (1970, p.108) in the following way :

> Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am".

This, Mbiti (1970) claims, is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man. Commenting on traditional life in Kenya, Kenyatta (1965, p.297) echoes similar views:

> According to Gikuyu ways of thinking, nobody is an isolated individual, or rather, his uniqueness is a secondary fact about him; first and foremost he is several people's relative and several people's contemporary.

Menkiti (1979, p.158) concurs:

> A crucial distinction thus exists between the African view of man and the view of man found in Western thought: in the African view it is the community which defines the person as a person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory.

One is, therefore, a biological relative of a broad family; is linked to a broad network of other people through marriage; associates with others through community roles, duties, obligations and responsibilities, and is several other

people's contemporary or neighbour. In traditional African life a person depends on others just as much as others depend on him/her.

Letseka (2000) also observes that, traditional Africa morality is known for its concern with human welfare, hence "ubuntu", which means humanness. Gyekye (1997, p.158) argues that:

> ... if one were to look for a pervasive and fundamental concept in African socioethical thought generally - a concept that animates other intellectual activities and forms of behaviour, including religious behaviour, and provides continuity, resilience, nourishment, and meaning to life - that concept would most probably be humanism.

Humanism is used here to refer to a philosophy that sees human needs, interests and dignity as of fundamental importance and concern. Letseka (2000, p.182) points out that the expression: "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" captures the underlying principles of interdependence and humanism in African life. It translates to "a person depends on others just as much as others depend on him/her". It illuminates the communal embeddedness and connectedness of a person to other persons. It also highlights the importance attached to people and to human relationships. As Sindane (1994, p.8-9) suggests: "Ubuntu inspires us to expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference of their humanness so as to inform and enrich our own."

In other words, to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others. The underlying concern of "ubuntu" is with the welfare of others. In fact, Letseka (2000) argues that, individuals who strive for and fully embrace the notion of ubuntu as their goal are driven by a humanist concern for treating others with fairness. They are probably hoping that they in turn will also be treated with fairness, should they find themselves in similar circumstances. Fairness and humanness are, according to Letseka (2000), crucial to personal well-being. A fulfilled and flourishing life ought to be one in which persons are reasonably well fed, well clothed and housed, in good health, loved, secure, and able to make a conscious effort to treat others with fairness and humanness because they in turn are treated that way.

These commonalities in African experience, namely, a sense of communality and "ubuntu" (humanness) would indicate, as Teffo (2000) argues, that there is a way of thinking, of knowing and of acting, that is peculiar to the African. For Africans, what they know is inseparable from how they know it in the lived experience of their African culture. This sense of Africanness is, in other words, born out of a deep socioethical sense of cultural unity that provides the

African identity with its distinctiveness. What this may mean for the nature and content of an African educational discourse is my concern in what follows.

African knowledge and educational discourse

In the light of such a sense of Africanness, what then are the implications for the construction of an African discourse in philosophy of education? What ought to be the purpose of education in an African context and within the framework of African philosophy? And how does traditional African educational practice seek to educate the child?

Notwithstanding the diversity inherent in an African knowledge system, I have identified two general themes in African philosophy, namely, African communalism and the notion of "ubuntu". These two themes can be said to be pervasive to African philosophical thought in a socioethical sense in that they transcend the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity of African peoples. In the light of this, it might be proposed that educating for communal life and "ubuntu" would be crucial to traditional African educational thought and practice.

Educating for life in the community would be rooted in, as Mkabela and Luthuli (1997) note, a welfare concern, where the basis of communalism is giving priority to the community and respect for the person. It also involves sharing with and helping persons. Educational discourse within this African frame of reference would help African people function in relation to one another in their communal tradition. Such a functioning would promote a collective effort directed ultimately at the good of the community. This collective effort in turn, would be characterised by a spirit of "ubuntu" which sees human need, interests and dignity as of fundamental importance and concern. For educational endeavour this would mean that traditional African educational thought and practice would be directed at fostering humane people endowed with moral norms and virtues such as kindness, generosity, compassion, benevolence, courtesy and respect and concern for others. In short, an African educational discourse would be fundamentally concerned with "ubuntu" in the service of the community and personal well-being.

Letseka (2000) is of the opinion that such an educational concern can be promoted through a pragmatic approach in which youngsters learn and acquire

it by example. The condition for such a pragmatic approach would be that youngsters live in communities that fully embrace and value humanism, understood as "ubuntu". It is assumed that persons in such communities would strive to treat others with a sense of "ubuntu", which entails treating them with fairness. A reciprocal expectation would be that those who are treated with fairness will also return the favour and treat others with fairness. As a normative concept, fairness is taken to be a desirable virtue on account of its concern with humane relationships.

The emphasis on communalism and "ubuntu" in traditional African thought and experience, also requires education in the African context to pay attention to interpersonal and co-operative skills. In this regard, Letseka (2000, p.189) argues that: "Certainly interpersonal skills have been shown to be an integral part of educating for ubuntu and the promotion of communally accepted and desirable moral norms and virtues."

The development of cooperative skills in younger people will, therefore, play a crucial role in promoting and sustaining the sort of communal interdependence and concern with the welfare of others that is encouraged by "ubuntu". This sort of interdependence highlights the fundamental principle governing traditional African life, namely, that persons depend on others just as much as others depend on them.

Traditional education in the African context, has sought to instil desirable attitudes, dispositions, skills and habits in children by means of recounting the oral traditions of the community. A great deal of philosophical and educational material is, as Okeke (1982) notes, embedded in the oral traditions and customs of the people. An important aspect of traditional African education thought and practice is, therefore, concerned with teaching children the oral tradition as well as helping them to learn to use language creatively and effectively. According to Boateng (1990) and Fajana (1986), such learning is in essence a central feature in the education of the African child, because it is through oral traditions that much of the history of the community, as well as its values and beliefs are passed on from one generation to the next. Oral traditions, therefore, played an active part in the African's everyday life and were a vital educational force in supplying accounts of a group's origin and related precedents to present-day beliefs, actions, and codes of behaviour. An educated person in an African context will, according to Fafunwa (1974, p.20), therefore, be an individual who is: "... honest, respectable, skilled, cooperative and conforms to the social order of the day."

In this sense, traditional African educational thought and practice is characterized not only by its concern with the person, but also by its interweaving of social, economic, political, cultural, and educational threads together into a common tapestry. And as a result, traditional education in Africa is distinguished by the importance attached to its collective and social nature, as well as its intimate tie with social and communal life. Education, then, in the traditional African setting cannot, and indeed, should not, be separated from life itself. It is a natural process by which the child gradually acquires skill, knowledge, and attitudes appropriate to life in his or her community - an education inspired by a spirit of "ubuntu" in the service of the community.

The centuries-old subjugation of Africa to colonial exploitation, ranging from slavery, to the creation of socioeconomic structures during the colonial era which were singularly designed to achieve maximum extraction and exportation of raw materials, wreaked serious damage that remain palpable years after the demise of colonial rule. This was accomplished, as Nkomo (2000) notes, by a whole range of arrangements including educational philosophies, curricula and practices whose context correspond with that of the respective colonial powers. In order to address this state of affairs in South Africa, a distinctively African knowledge system would have as its objective the goal of recovering the humanistic and ethical principles embedded in African philosophy, and more particularly, in the notions of communality and "ubuntu". Such an African knowledge system would also, as Hoppers (2000) points out, constitute an attempt to develop both a vision and a practice of education that goes beyond schooling, because it is about empowerment, laying the basis for African people to participate in mastering and directing the course of change and fulfilling the vision of learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together as equals with others. An educational discourse of this kind, views knowledge and minds not as commodities, not just human resources to be developed and exploited, and then cast aside, but as treasures to be cultivated to improve the quality of life of both individuals and societies. In such an educational dispensation, educational endeavour is directed, not at human resource development but rather, at the development of resourceful human beings in the service of their communities.

African philosophy, therefore, I would argue, provides a philosophical framework that can, and should, contribute to the transformation of educational discourse in philosophy of education in South Africa. This is primarily because, African philosophy respects diversity, acknowledges lived

experience and challenges the hegemony of Western Eurocentric forms of universal knowledge. Furthermore, such a pluralistically sensitive philosophical framework, such as, African philosophy can, also, contribute to the construction of empowering knowledge that will enable communities in South Africa to participate in their own educational development.

Conclusion

In South Africa, there is certainly much agonizing at the moment over the future form and direction which philosophy of education should take and many calls for new approaches and relevant paradigms (Higgs1999). In this regard, the discourse in philosophy of education in South Africa needs to take note of the contribution that African philosophy can make to the transformation of educational theory and practice. African philosophy, engendered by its appreciation of diversity and directed by a pragmatic concern for a better quality of life for all, can ensure that education ceases to function as an ideological handmaiden serving group interests in maintaining relations of power and domination. Educational discourse in South Africa certainly stands in need of this liberation from ideological hegemony which derives its power from the hegemony of Western Eurocentric forms of universal knowledge. People cannot be empowered if they are locked into ways of thinking that work to oppress them. Nor can people be empowered if they do not have access to those indigenous forms of knowledge which provide them with their identity as persons. The ideal of an African discourse in philosophy of education is for an epistemologically rich society of multiple sets of conceptual schemes, each giving us an entry into reality and maximizing a many sided understanding of whatever educational issues are at question in such a society.

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