
(South) African(a) philosophy of education: a reply to Higgs and Parker

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Abstract

There is a growing interest in African philosophy in South Africa following the dismantling of legal apartheid. In recently published works we also witnessed arguments presented for/against African philosophy's centrality in a new vision for philosophy of education in South Africa. In this paper I respond to these debates by raising some of the difficulties with the term African philosophy and the potential danger of a single philosophy dominating education theory and practice in South Africa.

Introduction

In 2003 the *Journal of Education* 30 published two articles on African(a) philosophy and its potential influence on educational discourse in South Africa. In the first article, Higgs (2003) points out that philosophical discourse in South Africa about the nature of education has always been fragmented. Traditionally, he argues, some educationists have worked within (neo)Marxist paradigms; others' work could be located within what might be loosely termed 'democratic liberalism'; and there were also those who worked within the analytic tradition emanating from the Institute of Education at the University of London, and so on. During the apartheid years, Higgs (2003) notes, Fundamental Pedagogics dominated philosophical discourse in South Africa. He suggests that with the dismantling of apartheid and the abandoning of a system of Christian National Education there now is a need to re-vision philosophy of education in South Africa – in his words, a need for “a new philosophical discourse in education” (Higgs 2003, p.6). Higgs (2003) argues for the centrality of an African discourse in the re-visioning of philosophy of education in South Africa, and locates his argument within the call for an African Renaissance.

In presenting his argument Higgs provides a useful overview of African philosophy, particularly to those not familiar with the field. Two main arguments pervade Higgs's article. Firstly, he argues that, even though an array of philosophies constitutes African philosophy, the diverse discourses of African philosophy have a common set of values: communalism, *ubuntu* and humanism. These values are not separate, but interwoven. His second argument is that these values should be the basis of a new education discourse in South Africa.

Parker (2003) authors the second article, which is a response to Higgs's article. He finds Higgs's arguments unconvincing on the grounds that the arguments are ahistorical and decontextualised. Parker (2003, p.24) uses what he terms "glimpses of history and context" to support his critique of Higgs's article and then goes on to explore a particular strand of African philosophy, called Africana philosophy. Although I support the general thrust of Parker's critique, I find aspects of his arguments unconvincing. In this article, I point out some gaps in both Higgs's and Parker's arguments and provide a more nuanced reading of African(a) philosophy.

Philosophy of education in South Africa

Parker critiques the typology Higgs uses to describe discourses of South African philosophy of education. First he points out that, although Higgs employs a useful analytical tool, he uses it only at a 'conceptual level' and does not examine the power relations operating between and within these discourses. Secondly, he claims that Higgs's typology is too brief and that it is not mapped onto a social reality: "there is a lack of reference to people, institutions and texts, to their histories and to their relations to political and economic contexts" (2003, p.26). Parker then goes on to map Higgs's typology onto social reality. For example, he refers to vigorous debates that the proponents of democratic liberalism and analytic philosophy (often inseparable) had with Marxists as evidenced in proceedings of conferences of the Kenton Education Association and the journal *Perspectives in Education*. He argues that the democratic liberalists, Marxists and analytic philosophers had in common one characteristic, opposition to Fundamental Pedagogics (a philosophy of education characteristic of the Afrikaans-speaking institutions and those ethnic institutions that were controlled by the apartheid state). Parker conflates the discourses oppositional to Fundamental Pedagogics (FP) and refers to them as the analytic discourses, which he says were in the main

confined to White English-speaking universities. He notes that, given the struggle against apartheid of the 1970s and 1980s and the election of the democratically led ANC government in 1994, it might have been expected that the analytic discourses would increase their influence and that the FP discourses would dissipate. However, the analytic philosophies only increased their presence in major policy initiatives (see Parker, 2003, p.25). He argues that “most teacher education institutions in South Africa remained within discourses descended from FP – albeit stripped of the racist and Afrikaner nationalist language and imagery that characterised FP” (Parker, 2003, p.25). Furthermore, Parker notes the nation-wide restructuring that teacher education underwent in the 1990s, leaving only 17 public higher education institutions to provide teacher education. He writes:

Of the 17 institutions, perhaps 5 could be regarded as having traditions of philosophy of education characterised by analytic discourses and the remainder, in the erstwhile Afrikaans and ‘homeland’ universities, by FP. Given a predominantly liberal democratic form of analytic discourse. . . and an FP that has disintegrated into a variety of neo-FPs, there would appear to be no existing discourse that provides a suitable breeding-ground for a new philosophy of education (Parker, 2003, p.26).

After mapping Higgs’s typology onto ‘social reality’, Parker ends up with a cruder categorisation than that of Higgs, namely, the analytic discourses versus the (neo)FP discourses, a typology problematic in several senses and shows Parker culpable of what he accuses Higgs of doing. I can understand why Parker uses a single category for discourses that were oppositional to FP, but invoking the term ‘analytic’ for this category is problematic. In Western philosophy, analytic philosophy is a distinct tradition from continental philosophy and North American pragmatism. Analytic philosophers tend to be largely (though not exclusively) English-speaking, the intellectual heirs of Russell, Moore and Wittgenstein and concerned mainly with concepts and propositions (Audi, 1995). In philosophy of education those who use conceptual analysis, that is, the intellectual heirs of Richard Peters and Paul Hirst, would fit the category. However, the ideas of Marx together with other individuals and movements shaped one of the trends in Continental philosophy, *structuralism*, which reached its high point between 1950 and 1970 (Audi, 1995). South African philosophers of education who drew on (neo)Marxism during the 1970s and 1980s therefore used ideas emanating from Continental philosophy which were notably different to those of various forms of analytic philosophy. Parker’s conflation of ideas derived from two disparate traditions of philosophy (analytic and Continental) and labelling the combined category ‘analytic discourses’ is, to say the least, problematic.

When providing his grouping of the 17 remaining teacher education institutions (above), it is interesting that Parker does not tell us which are the five institutions (presumably he is referring to traditionally English-speaking institutions) characterised by analytic discourses, nor does he provide us with any sense of what are the ‘variety of neo-FPs’ that he refers to – what constitutes a neo-FP and what does it look like? Where, in his terms, is the “reference to people, institutions and texts” (Parker, 2003, p.26), and so on? Moreover, Parker appears to underestimate the changes that have occurred within institutions that may traditionally have been characterised by a philosophy of education called FP. The University of the Western Cape, for example, was established as an ethnic university by the apartheid state for so-called Coloureds. At the time of its establishment the medium of instruction at the institution was Afrikaans and it would be fair to claim that its philosophy of education was characterised by FP. In fact, in the 1970s, Philosophy of Education courses were called Fundamental Pedagogics. However, UWC became a site of resistance and struggle in the 1970s and 1980s, which provided space for other influences. Philosophy of education, in the 1980s and 1990s was greatly influenced by neo-Marxist and more particularly analytic discourses under the leadership of, among others, Wally Morrow and Nelleke Bak. It would be problematic to categorise UWC as (neo)FP. At Stellenbosch University Yusef Waghid (trained in analytic philosophy) is currently chair of philosophy of education. Many of his PhD and Master’s students are conducting research within the analytic traditions and some within African philosophical traditions. It would be problematic to characterise philosophy of education at Stellenbosch University as (neo)FP. I can go on to speak of Philip Higgs’s work at Unisa and other instances as well, all pointing to Parker’s mapping of typologies onto social reality as being fundamentally flawed.

However, I agree with Parker that current discourses on philosophy of education in South Africa might not provide a suitable breeding-ground for a new philosophy of education and that at present philosophers of education may be more concerned about survival (given institutional mergers and radical restructuring within institutions), than with becoming activists for a new discourse. But let me turn now to a discussion of African(a) philosophy.

African(a) philosophy

As mentioned, Higgs provides a useful overview of different strands in African philosophy. He then goes on to argue that, despite the disparate

perspectives within African philosophy, there are what he refers to as ‘general themes’ in African philosophy. These general themes for Higgs are African communalism, the notion of *ubuntu* and humanism. These themes, Higgs argues, are commonalities in African experience that are indicative of a way of thinking, of knowing and of acting that is peculiar to the African experience. There are two points of critique that I wish to raise concerning Higgs’s argument. Firstly, the notions of communalism and *ubuntu* may be distinct from Eurocentric values that have suppressed traditional African customs and ways of knowing, but they may not be peculiar to Africa. As Parker correctly (2003, p.30) notes:

It is not clear how one distinguishes African humanism from European humanism, or African communalism from Chinese communalism. Although designated by an African word ‘ubuntu’, the notions that we are human through our relations with other humans, that our individual identity is embedded in social relations within the fabrics of multiple communities, has a long history in European, Chinese and Indian philosophy.

Secondly, Higgs does not examine how different strands within African philosophy engage African communalism and the notion of *ubuntu* so as to conceptually link his overview of African philosophy with his discussion on general themes in African philosophy. It is my contention that different strands of African philosophy engage African communalism and *ubuntu* differently. To illustrate my point I shall invoke Oruka’s famous four trends of African philosophy. I use them for the sake of my argument and am aware that there are more than four strands in African philosophy and that Oruka himself later expanded his four to six trends (see Gratton, 2003). Oruka (2002) identifies the following four trends: ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, national-ideological philosophy, and professional philosophy.

Ethno-philosophy is exemplified in the work of Placide Tempels on the ontology of the Bantu. Tempels was probably the first person to use the term ‘philosophy’ with regard to the thoughts of African people. Gratton (2003) points out that for the ethno-philosopher, “philosophy is latent within the everyday actions of a people; philosophy, as such, is also the worldviews that guide and maintain a culture”. He notes that ethno-philosophers reproduce both the latent and the explicit philosophical doctrines in the hope of providing future African philosophers with an indigenous ‘intellectual matrix’. Ethno-philosophy has been subjected to various criticisms. For example, Hountondji argues that ethno-philosophy is not African because it is addressed to Western audiences and in so doing reinforces stereotypes of African thought as being pseudo-philosophy or pre-scientific. Bodunrin also

argues that it provides a false sense of 'tradition' as devoid of the problems and struggles which characterise all societies. Oruka's second trend, philosophic sagacity, is based on his research on wise Kenyan men and women. For Oruka (1990, p.28) philosophic sagacity is the "thoughts of wisemen and women in any given community and is a way of thinking and explaining the world that fluctuates between popular wisdom and didactic wisdom". He argues that "one way of looking for the traces of African philosophy is to wear the uniform of anthropological field work and use dialogical techniques to pass through the anthropological fogs to the philosophical ground" (Oruka, 1990, p.xxi). Oruka views philosophic sagacity as distinct from ethno-philosophy, since sages do not simply transmit the thoughts of communities, but rather critically evaluate what might be unquestioningly accepted by members of communities. One of the difficulties with philosophic sagacity is that one cannot easily distinguish the source of the field reports when the researcher is a trained philosopher – are the field reports a record of the philosophic ideas of the sages or a reconstruction of them by a trained philosopher (as was the case with Oruka) after engagement with the ideas of the sages (Gratton, 2003, p.68)? Bodunrin (1984) has sympathy with Oruka's notion of philosophic sagacity, but argues that, together with ethno-philosophy, it comes perilously close to non-philosophy because it is based on the views of everyday people. The third trend in African philosophy that Oruka identifies is the nationalist ideologies produced by Africa's first post-colonial leaders, including Leopold Senghor, Julius Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah. These leaders sought not only to decolonise the nations they led, but also their people's minds (Gratton, 2003, p.69). Although they were strongly Pan-Africanist, they were influenced by Western ideas ranging from Existentialism to Marxism. Bodunrin (1984) argues that these national leaders took up ethno-philosophy "to glorify an African past in order to forecast an almost utopian non-colonial future". However, Bodunrin argues that the ideas of these nationalists lacked rigour and systemisation, and therefore cannot be regarded as philosophy. The rigour and systemisation that Bodunrin refers to is provided by Oruka's fourth trend, professional philosophy. Bodunrin (1984, p.2) describes this trend as the

work of trained philosophers. Many of them reject the assumptions of ethno-philosophy and take a universalist point of view. Philosophy, many of them argue, must have the same meaning in all cultures although the subjects that receive priority, and perhaps the method of dealing with them, may be dictated by cultural biases and the existential situation in the society within which the philosophers operate. According to this school, African philosophy is the philosophy done by African philosophers whether it be in the area of logic, metaphysics, ethics, or history of philosophy.

Gratton (2003) points out that this trend identifies strongly with the analytic tradition of Western philosophy as evidenced by the fact that universalists such as Wiredu, Hountondji and others have referred to themselves as the Vienna circle of African philosophy. It is this association of universalists with the analytic tradition that has been a source of critique. For example, Ikuenobe (1997) refers to the universalist position as parochial because it uses Western analytic philosophy as the yardstick by which to measure whether the other trends in African philosophy qualify to be called ‘philosophy’. He argues that there is an array of traditions and approaches within Western philosophy that universalists do not account for.

The four trends in African philosophy provide a continuum with extreme positions of a narrow particularism characteristic of ethno-philosophy at the one end, and a narrow universalism of professional philosophy on the other. But these four positions can also be used as a heuristic for mapping the positions of the four trends in regard to notions such as communalism and *ubuntu* – a mapping that Higgs neglects to provide. For particularists, philosophy and culture are tightly intertwined – so much so that cultural values/expressions are commensurate to philosophy. For particularists, *ubuntu* is not only a cultural value but a philosophy. For universalists, the notion of *ubuntu* may be the object/subject of philosophical inquiry, but cannot simply be referred to as philosophy – it has to pass the test of rigour and systematisation. At this juncture I critically review the strand of African philosophy that Parker refers to as African philosophy.

Whilst Higgs locates his argument for the centrality of an African discourse in the re-visioning of philosophy of education in South Africa within a recent call for an African Renaissance, Parker traces the discourse of African philosophy in South Africa to influences of the 1960s. Parker argues that the dominance and pervasiveness of FP had at least one unintended outcome: it prepared “the ground for an intellectual tradition of resistance nurtured by those most brutalised by FP and Apartheid” (2003, p.30). He notes that during the late 1960s a cadre of intellectuals (from the universities of the North and Fort Hare as well as the medical school at the University of Natal) emerged who had read major theorists of the Western canon (Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Husserl, Sartre) alongside African authors such as Malcolm X, Cabral, Fanon, Nyerere, Nkrumah, etc. Parker states that in the early 1970s this emerging discourse of Black Consciousness found expression in the writings of Steve Biko. He goes on to argue that in post-apartheid South Africa “this ‘indigenised’ discourse has become part of a broader international movement

known broadly as Africana philosophy” (Parker, 2003, p.31). Parker writes:

Africana philosophy has become a movement that embraces the African continent and the African Diaspora and draws on a long tradition of African philosophy that foregrounds the everyday life experiences of Africans as slaves, colonised subjects, poor and oppressed. As a discipline, Africana philosophy draws on oral traditions, early writings. . . and cultural artefacts such as music as well the rigorous techniques of reason and analytic philosophy to construct African philosophy as a distinct discourse (2003, p.31).

Parker goes on to argue that there is therefore an existing discourse that gives substance to the label ‘African philosophy’. This discourse draws on different discourses in African philosophy; “a combination of sagacity grounded in common life experiences of Africans with Hegelian tradition and existentialism” (Parker, 2003, p.31). Parker argues that Africana philosophy is not a synthetic discourse, but appropriates what it takes from other discourses. It negates Eurocentrism, but it is not a simple negation because it can also “contest the dominance of Eurocentric philosophy by engaging and contesting it – even using its own tools such as rigorous rational analysis – to challenge the power relations that underpin and are expressed through Eurocentric discourses” Parker (2003, p.32). In his article Parker elaborates on the idea of Africana philosophy and points out that it shares with postmodernism “a desire to challenge a false universal humanism, but without losing those values – liberty, equality, dignity – so extolled by that very humanism” (2003, p.34).

Parker ends his exploration of Africana philosophy by examining what it might look like in practice. In doing so he refers to a debate in political philosophy published in *Journal of Education* 28. The debate is between Dieltiens and Enslin (2002), arguing against participatory democracy, and Piper (2002), arguing for participatory democracy. I shall not elaborate on the debate in detail (for details see Dieltiens and Enslin, 2002; Piper, 2002; Parker, 2003); suffice it to say that Parker’s use of this debate as Africana philosophy in practice is unconvincing. Parker does not show us how this debate is located in what he describes as the “intellectual tradition of resistance nurtured by those most brutalised by FP and Apartheid”. In what sense does the debate between Dieltiens and Enslin (2002) and Piper (2002) embrace the African continent and the African Diaspora, and in what sense does it draw “on a long tradition of African philosophy that foregrounds the everyday life experiences of Africans as slaves, colonised subjects, poor and oppressed” (Parker, 2003, p.31)? Parker provides no evidence of this. Although the debates make reference to the South African schooling system, I

argue that the debate between Dieltiens and Enslin (2002) and Piper (2002) is firmly located within two traditions in Western Political Philosophy, more particularly, Rawlsian liberalism and Habermasian critical theory. It certainly is not an instance of the Africana philosophy that Parker describes in his earlier description of Africana philosophy. One can see evidence of philosophic sagacity and elements of ethno-philosophy in the earlier part of his exploration of Africana philosophy, but as his exploration develops and particularly where he ends – the debate in political philosophy – it becomes clear that his notion of Africana philosophy appears to be nothing more than an extension of the universalist position in African philosophy. I think that Parker’s notion of an African(a) philosophy can be strengthened by invoking what Outlaw (2002) refers to as the deconstructive and reconstructive challenges. These challenges might be read into Parker’s exploration of African(a) philosophy but they are, perhaps, not explicitly articulated.

The future of an African(a) philosophy lies in the recognition that the post-colonial present is hybridised and that a transcendental synthesis (of traditional and Western) is unworkable (Gratton, 2003). However, the hybridised post-colonial presence does not mean the conservation of two competing identities, but rather invokes “the important ways in which post-structuralists use the language of the dominant structure in order to re-organize it from within” (Gratton, 2003, p.73). As Bhabha (1985, p.2) writes:

A contingent borderline experience opens up in-between colonizer and colonized. This space of cultural and interpretive indecidability produced in the ‘present’ of the colonial moment. . . The margin of hybridity, where cultural differences ‘contingently’ and conflictually touch. . . resists the binary opposition of racial and cultural groups.

Recognising the reconstructive/deconstructive force of African philosophy negates the idea of African philosophical practice being “reduced to that which is at worst an a-historical (universalist) or relativist (particularist) enterprise” (Gratton, 2003, p.65). Gratton argues that by working on the margins of the dominant colonial and metaphysical discourses, African philosophy “is able to render their (i.e. Eurocentric philosophy) blind spots and fissures in order to displace them”(2003, p.65). African(a) philosophy is at best a recounting/reconstruction of the African lived experience, but when it is invoked the consequence is the deconstruction of (Western) philosophy. As Gratton (2003, p.65) writes:

‘African[a] philosophy’ is a performative signifier that by its very name brings together and calls into question an endless number of oppositions: past/future, universalist/particularist, African thought/philosophy, etc.

Although I share Parker's concern that the erosion of discipline-based approaches in South African teacher-education policies and international trends in favour of more occupationally relevant forms of training augurs badly for African(a) philosophy of education, its reconstructive/deconstructive potential has to be explored by the growing number of academics and post-graduate African(a) philosophers of education so that the very policies (and the philosophies which underpin them) currently produced on teacher education in South Africa can be deconstructed.

Conclusion

Higgs (2003) initiates an important discussion on the re-visioning of philosophy of education in South Africa by arguing for the centrality of African philosophy in a new discourse of philosophy of education. Parker (2003) replies to Higgs by pointing out gaps in Higgs's argument, his main critique being that Higgs does not map his arguments onto a 'social reality'. Parker importantly points out that the idea of an African(a) philosophy of education in South Africa may be thwarted for two reasons: philosophers of education are more concerned about their own survival than in being activists for a new philosophy of education; the erosion of discipline-based approaches in new policies on teacher education. In this article I show some contradictions in Parker's critique of Higgs's article and attempt to strengthen Parker's exploration of African(a) philosophy by briefly exploring African(a) philosophy as deconstructive force. In (South) Africa, where indigenous knowledge systems reside among the majority of its people and Western philosophies remain dominant through new forms of colonisation latent in processes such as globalisation, an African(a) philosophy of education is vital. Hope for education in (South) Africa depends on recounting visions of Africa's history and reconstructing it to the present, but also in displacing dominant discourses, including those evident in South African policy documents such as the Norms and Standards for Educators. African(a) philosophy (of education) as a reconstructive/deconstructive force might offer hope for education in (South) Africa. It will also avert the danger of a single African philosophy (of education) from becoming dominant in the way that Fundamental Pedagogics did under apartheid. African(a) philosophy (of education) as a reconstructive/deconstructive force is singular-plural.

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