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Ubuntu: The Pursuit of an Indigenous Curriculum Reform Policy in Post-colonial Lesotho, Zimbabwe and South Africa

Abstract

School reform policy in post-colonial societies is often guided by Euro-American theory from the North. Theory generated in the South is marginalised as backward and unscientific. The present study, couched within the Southern Theory framework, disrupts the hegemony of Northern Theory by examining the implementation of the indigenous philosophy of Ubuntu in post-colonial Southern Africa. Ubuntu advocates for collective responsibility, sharing, humility and love for humanity – over selfish individualism. Employing critical discourse analysis, this qualitative desktop study reviews the implementation of Ubuntu as a reform policy to decolonise the school curriculum in Lesotho, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Findings indicate that curriculum reform policy is unequivocal in championing Ubuntu as the overarching philosophy for school reform. Although some aspects of Ubuntu are reflected in subject content and classroom pedagogy, a disturbing policy-practice gap was observed in existing literature. Some teachers in Lesotho, Zimbabwe and South Africa lack knowledge and values of Ubuntu. They are ill-prepared to promote this indigenous culture in their practice and do not show compassion and respect for learners. Some male teachers engage in illicit sexual relations with learners. To foster a decolonised Ubuntu-centred curriculum, teachers need knowledge on the selfless values of Ubuntu and how to nurture participatory democracy, respect, and love for humanity in their classrooms.

Keywords: Ubuntu, curriculum reform, post-colonial societies, indigenous knowledge systems, policy-practice gap, Southern Theory

Introduction

Curriculum reform in post-colonial societies is often guided by theory from the industrialised North (Chakraborty, 2021; Connell, 2007; Sigauke, 2016). Constructivism and outcomes-based education (alternatively called competency-based education) are popular as guiding philosophies for curriculum reform in Africa and other parts of the developing South. Socialist theory was popular in Latin America, Africa and Asia before the collapse of the Eastern bloc in the 1990s. Consequently, theory rooted in indigenous epistemology is generally marginalised as inferior to Northern Theory.

Colonialism nurtured formal education systems that serve the interests of the North, whilst undermining indigenous knowledge systems as backward, irrational, superstitious and unscientific (Chakraborty, 2021; Sigauke, 2016). However, the attainment of independence has seen policy reformers in the underdeveloped South challenging Euro-American centred education as alien to local needs. As a result, the decolonisation agenda has gathered momentum in the 21st century, amplifying the clarion call for the inclusion of indigenous theories in curriculum reform initiatives.

Ubuntu is one indigenous theory that has captured the attention of policy reformers in the South.

Ubuntu is a supra-national pre-colonial ideology, the Bantu people of sub-Saharan Africa shared before the advent of 19th century imperialism, which divided Africa into modern nation states. Ubuntu is a word from the Nguni language family (IsiNdebele, IsiSwati, IsiXhosa and IsiZulu) of Southern African meaning humanity, humility, kindness and generosity (Bangura, 2009). This ideology stresses co-operation, communitarianism, tolerance, and love for fellow humans. The Shona of Zimbabwe call this shared way of life 'Unhu'. The Sotho of Lesotho refer to it as 'Botho', the Chewa/Nyanja of Malawi and Zambia call it 'Umnthu', while the Banyambo of Northern Tanzania and the Baganda of Uganda term it 'Obuntu'. The Nguni say "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" – translating to "a person is a person through other persons". Bangura (2009, pp. 35-36) summarises it: "To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others in its infinite variety of content and form". This maxim is the cornerstone of African way of life and spirituality which recognises linguistic, historical and cultural diversity.

Despite the socio-politico-economic dislocations and distortions caused by colonialism, the Bantu of sub-Saharan Africa continue to share the values of Ubuntu. It an umbilical cord unifying the different Bantu groups. Ubuntu assumes the supremacy of collective solidarity over individualism by emphasising that "I am because we are, we are because I am" (Murove, 2014, p. 36). Without other people a Bantu is incomplete, underscoring the importance of self because of others.

In pursuit of the decolonisation agenda, post-colonial curriculum reform in Southern Africa adopted Ubuntu as the guiding philosophy for school reform, albeit at different times and in unique contexts. After Lesotho gained independence in 1966, it sought to reform its education in line with values of Ubuntu. Zimbabwe and South Africa also adopted Ubuntu as the overarching reform philosophy after independence in 1980 and 1994, respectively. Despite this common policy position, Ubuntu seems not to have gained much traction in the three countries' classrooms. School knowledge and classroom practice remain largely Anglicised and Euro-American-centric.

Purpose of the study

Theory generated in the South remains marginalised while Euro-American epistemology dominates academia and school reform. Education systems in Southern African countries remain grounded in Western theory marginalising indigenous knowledge. Since the attainment of political independence, the knowledge landscape appears not to have changed much in most post-colonial societies. Chakraborty (2021, p. 55) proposes that: "Theory has to be decolonized, de-prejudicized, de-jargonized…shorn off its usual halo in the academia and its self-patting, world-conquering pretensions". The tentacles of Northern Theory continue to hold Southern Theory captive.

This paper views Ubuntu as a counter-hegemonic ideology to the pervasive perpetuation of unequal epistemic power relations between the developed North and the underdeveloped South. Despite curriculum reform proclamations by governments in Southern Africa, indigenous knowledge systems remain peripheralised. Western epistemology dominates the theory of knowing. The

purpose of this paper, therefore, is to interrogate the extent to which curriculum reform in Lesotho, Zimbabwe and South Africa has attained the values of Ubuntu promulgated in official reform policy. Thus, the research question directing this paper is: To what extent are teachers promoting the values of Ubuntu in their classroom practice?

Ubuntu as a guiding philosophy

Serious efforts to pursue Ubuntu can be traced to Lesotho's adoption of the policy of Education with Production (EWP) in 1978. EWP promoted group solidarity, co-operation, and self-reliance among learners (Tlali, 2018). In 2000 Lesotho universalised primary education in pursuit of equality and social justice. "But proper implementation of these policy statements has, up to now, been frustrated by lack of logistical support and problems of attitudes among the people", notes Tlali (2018, p. 40). Lesotho's current Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP) "is derived from the Basotho philosophical statements of justice, equality, peace, prosperity, participatory democracy and mutual co-existence which underpin their way of life… these principles form the core of Basotho national consciousness" (MoET, 2009, p. 3). Ubuntu, therefore, is Lesotho's cross-cutting philosophy for current curriculum reform.

When Zimbabwe attained independence in 1980, the government rejected Ubuntu as the guiding philosophy for post-war reconstruction (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). It borrowed scientific socialism from the Soviet Union as the national reform ideology. But the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, forced policy makers in Zimbabwe to rethink the nation's philosophy for curriculum reform. Consequently, Zimbabwe's New Curriculum Framework 2015-2022 states that: "Every curriculum must have an underpinning philosophy and a set of principles which are ideals and beliefs considered important by society and educational practitioners... The country's values and principles are largely traceable to *Unhu/Ubuntu/Vumunhu* philosophy" (MOPSE, 2015, p. 13).

In South Africa the pursuit of Ubuntu as a guiding philosophy for political and educational reform is traceable to the collapse of apartheid in 1994 and the setting up of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1996. The TRC opened dialogue for peace, forgiveness, and unity among the previously warring races and groups. It also encouraged tolerance, humility, and love for humanity, in place of hatred and violence. Post-apartheid reforms in South Africa that include the Constitution of the Republic (Act 108 of 1996), the Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), National Curriculum Statements (NCS) to the current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) are all strongly informed by Ubuntu. These reform documents redress the inequalities of apartheid by promoting social justice. The CAPS document currently guiding curriculum reform is anchored in Ubuntu, as it seeks to "heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values…by ensuring that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed and valuing indigenous knowledge systems…" (DBE, 2011, p. 5).

Curriculum reform policy in South Africa, as in Lesotho and Zimbabwe, is guided by Ubuntu philosophy.

Theoretical grounding

This paper is grounded in Southern Theory to disrupt the dominance of Northern Theory in post-colonial curriculum reform discourse. Connell (2007) developed Southern Theory to challenge existing global dependency on theory from the metropolitan North. Southern Theory draws from previously neglected indigenous knowledge systems and anti-imperialist struggles. It generates novel philosophical lenses that decolonise the curriculum and open space for indigenous theory to guide school reform. Ubuntu, a strand of Southern Theory originating from Africa, reframes curriculum reform from a non-Western perspective.

Southern Theory was found appropriate in illuminating this study because current curriculum reforms in Lesotho, Zimbabwe and South Africa seek to liberate education from Euro-American hegemony. The three countries are contributing to the decolonisation agenda by promoting Ubuntu as the philosophy for curriculum reform. Ubuntu is rooted in indigenous African knowledge systems and offers a paradigm shift from Northern Theory. Besides reducing dependency on Western epistemology, Southern Theory elevates the philosophy of formerly colonised people to competing status with northern epistemology.

Methodology

This qualitative desktop study uses words, concepts, and terminologies as evidence, instead of numerical data. An electronic search on Goggle Scholar was guided by three key phrases – 'Ubuntu in Lesotho', 'Ubuntu in Zimbabwe' and 'Ubuntu in South Africa'. Studies published between 2000 and 2021 on the implementation of Ubuntu as the philosophy for curriculum reform in the three countries were selected and critiqued in search for themes and patterns. Data collection and analysis took place concurrently and iteratively.

The research design for this study is critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA is concerned with unequal power relations and injustice between powerful and powerless nations. Mullet (2018, p. 116) explains that "Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a qualitative analytical approach for critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities". CDA assumes that knowledge empowers and frees the oppressed through self-awareness and reflection. This design guides the review of literature published on the implementation of Ubuntu as a counter hegemonic ideology for curriculum reform theory from the North.

Findings

Existing literature on Ubuntu as an overarching indigenous curriculum reform philosophy in post-colonial Lesotho, Zimbabwe and South Africa shows that the three countries are still struggling to institutionalise this Southern Theory in their classrooms.

Lesotho's snail-pace progress

Reform philosophy in Lesotho, as outlined in the CAP document, is anchored in Ubuntu policy statements of equality, social justice, peace, prosperity, mutual co-

existence and participatory democracy (MoET, 2009). But existing research (Lepotho, 2021; Mokolatsie, 2019; Tlali, 2018) shows a disturbing policy-practice gap. Despite policy proclamations to cultivate a culture of communitarianism and collective responsibility, curriculum practice in Lesotho remains largely Euro-American centred.

Missionary influence in schools and Christian ethos continue to undermine efforts to institutionalise Ubuntu in Lesotho schools. "Christian schools inculcated what was seen to be a new and better way of life, founded upon a blend of Christian Protestant teachings, [and] a strong belief in the progress of the West", notes Gill (1992) cited in Mokolatsie (2019, p. 54). Christianity promotes Western values while marginalising traditional African religion (an intrinsic component of Ubuntu) as superstitious and demonic.

Some teachers and learners in Lesotho reflect negative attitudes towards learners with special needs. Lepotho (2021, p. 100) found that "children with special needs encountered difficulty in social interactions with regular class peers and teachers. They were often laughed at or devalued… they experience low acceptance by peers, loneliness, rejection and bullying". Ubuntu does not encourage any form of discrimination because "your child is also my child".

Zimbabwe struggles to institutionalise Ubuntu

Policy declares that Ubuntu is the cross-cutting philosophy for Zimbabwe's New Curriculum Framework 2015-2022 (MOPSE, 2015). But efforts to 'Ubuntulise' the curriculum have mainly focused on Heritage Studies, History and Social Studies. However, some progressive indigenous language teachers are using traditional Shona novels to promote Ubuntu attributes of hard work, solidarity, honesty, and perseverance (Viriri & Viriri, 2018). Geography teachers are also utilising indigenous knowledge to conscientise learners on traditional methods for rainfall prediction and climate change mitigation. Risiro (2019, pp. 32-33) notes that:

> When learners associate what is learnt from school with their experiences in the community, learning becomes more interesting... the integration of indigenous knowledge into the school curriculum contributes to the generation of new knowledge and the creation of a curriculum that is inclusive...

Nonetheless, the implementation of Ubuntu in Zimbabwean classrooms remains a challenge to most teachers. Obstacles faced by teachers range from limited knowledge, resource shortages, negative attitudes, urbanisation and lack of indigenous experts. Risiro (2019, p. 35) observes that: "The teachers are not fully knowledgeable of the Indigenous Knowledge content to be taught due to a lack of documented sources to which they can refer". Teachers' meager salaries and a deteriorating national economy also contribute to the failure to institutionalise Ubuntu in Zimbabwean schools. Christianity, the major religion in Zimbabwe, overrides indigenous traditions like Ubuntu which are regarded as backward and unscientific.

Ubuntu and decoloniality in South Africa

In a study on the use of indigenous games to decolonise mathematics pedagogy in South Africa, Nxumalo and Mncube (2019, p. 113) established that: "The games

build a sense of collective and collaborative spirit by teaching African children to embrace the values of selflessness, commitment to the bigger picture and sharing in order to survive". These games discourage individualism and teach learners team spirit. However, the major setback is that not all teachers are conversant with indigenous games because most of them grew up in urban areas where the games are no longer played.

But a study conducted in the Eastern Cape Province by Chidziva (2021) shows that mathematics teachers are successfully integrating Ubuntu principles in their practice. Ubuntu values of solidarity, care, patience, and respect empower learners to support each other in learning mathematics. Passive learners participated during lessons because Ubuntu encourages "the active participation of community members for the well-being of that community" (Chidziva, 2021, p. 276).

Despite policy efforts to promote Ubuntu, some schools in South Africa are not doing much to cultivate the values of compassion and humanness. Some schools in KwaZulu-Natal were not providing adequate psychosocial support for orphaned and vulnerable children, because Ubuntu values of caring for the weak and marginalised are being eroded by westernisation and urbanisation (Makhonza et al., 2019). For instance, beneficiaries of a school feeding scheme complained that teachers often insult them with comments like: "If the way you eat here at school matched your performance, we were all going to be happy" (Makhonza et al., 2019, p. 13527). Another learner added that: "Teachers should treat us as human beings, even if we struggle in class we still need to be respected".

Discussion

A common thread emerging from this discourse analysis is that some teachers in Lesotho, Zimbabwe and South Africa lack knowledge and values of Ubuntu. They do not show compassion and respect for learners. Ubuntu teaches that: "It takes a whole village to raise a child"; "your child is also my child"; and "your pain is my pain" (Murove, 2014). However, some teachers neglect learners. Others physically and emotionally abuse them. One learner protested: "Some teachers cannot teach Ubuntu because they do not have the Ubuntu qualities, they propose love to school pupils" (Viriri & Viriri, 2018, p. 111). This unprofessional behaviour undermines Ubuntu in schools and discredits teachers as role models.

Critics question the wisdom of reviving Ubuntu arguing that it is rooted "in traditional community settings characteristic of the past and no longer possible in modern complex mobile communities" (Mokolatsie, 2019, p. 142). Core Ubuntu ethos like group consensus and prioritising community before individual interests, are difficult to realise. There appears to be some romanticisation of Ubuntu which glorifies the past while understating some negative practices prevalent in pre-colonial Africa – like social class inequalities, slavery, gender discrimination, and civil wars. However, proponents of Ubuntu, like Chidziva (2021), Mokolatsie (2019) and Sigauke (2016), argue that this humane culture is what contemporary societies (that are egoistic and deeply divided) need to reignite the love for humanity.

Conclusion

Despite teething problems, this study shows that the pursuit of Ubuntu as a unifying indigenous philosophy is rewarding for curriculum reform in post-colonial societies. By promoting a home-brewed Southern Theory, the implementation of Ubuntu as an overarching philosophy disrupts the dominance of Northern Theory in curriculum reform discourse. Future research can pursue how curriculum reformers and teachers can nurture Ubuntu culture in schools, so that all learners are cared for irrespective of social class background. Further studies can internationalise Ubuntu as an alternative Southern Theory that unifies a volatile and fractured world. Promoting Ubuntu can benefit humanity. Neglecting this humane philosophy catalyses segregation, distrust and hostility among communities and nationalities that are highly interdependent (but deeply divided) in a volatile 21st century.

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