# Democracy & Education

# The Cultural Contours of Democracy
## Indigenous Epistemologies Informing South African Citizenship

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**Abstract**

Drawing upon the African concept of ubuntu, this article examines the epistemic orientations toward individual-society relations that inform democratic citizenship and identity in South Africa. Findings from focus group interviews conducted with 50 Xhosa teachers from all seven primary and intermediate schools in a township outside Cape Town depict the cultural contours of democracy and how the teachers reaffirm and question the dominant Western-oriented democratic narrative. Through ubuntu, defined as the virtue of being human premised upon respect, the Xhosa teachers interrupt the prevailing rights-and-responsibilities discourse to interpose a conception of democracy based on rights, responsibilities, and respect. Society and schools, in their view, fall short in educating young learners for democratic citizenship in South Africa; their insights offer ways for formal schooling to improve upon its democratic mission.

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**T**HIS QUALITATIVE CASE study, which applies the concept of ubuntu as its main theoretical perspective, examines the ways in which South African schoolteachers in a township outside Cape Town's city center view democracy and the role of formal schools in educating for democracy. According to Kubow (2007), ubuntu is an organizing principle in African morality: a unifying vision, spiritual foundation, and social ethic for guiding interactions, which manifests itself through indigenous practices such as conflict management, the protection of orphans, reciprocity, and social welfare, as well as through jurisprudential practices such as restorative justice. As an indigenous value system embodied in African philosophy, ubuntu comprises "a morality of compassion,

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communalism, and concern for the interests of the collective" (p. 313).

The Nguni word ubuntu is derived from the prefix ubu-, which signifies a process or state of perpetual becoming, while the stem –ntu refers to human beings (Mkhize, 2008). Taken together, ubuntu denotes a being that is in a continuous process of becoming. In English, ubuntu is equivalent to the notion of humanity (Shutte, 2008) or humanness (Tutu, 1996). The Nguni proverb umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu ("a person is a person through other people") refers to the dependence of human beings on others for personal growth.[1] Hence, individuals are not created by or from themselves, nor do they exist for their own selves: men and women come from and exist within a social network—a community. The meaning of this indigenous African expression is most eloquently explained by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who asserted that an individual is not simply an independent, solitary entity in the African worldview, but "human precisely in being enveloped in [the] community of other human beings, in being caught up in the bundle of life" (as cited in Bhengu, 1996, p. 11).

As an epistemic orientation toward individual-society relations, we contend that ubuntu is an underlying foundational concept that informs the views held by Xhosa schoolteachers concerning democratic citizenship and identity. The teachers in this study depict ubuntu as encompassing no fewer than three dimensions: philosophical (the mind); value and attitudinal (the heart); and action (the hand). During discussions concerning South Africa's postcolonial condition and the conceptualization and practice of democracy, teachers' responses were clearly grounded in the ethics of ubuntu. Recognizing that one cannot completely escape a dominant culture, which in this case is the West, the study sought to capture the voices and values of indigenous educators in order to critically examine the Western-oriented and commonly accepted rights-and-responsibilities democratic narrative.

Because the West has played a major role in shaping understandings about (and discourses of) democracy beyond its borders, it is important to be reminded of Western assumptions about democracy and then to explore how those in a non-Western context conceive of democracy. Western democracy originated in ancient Greece when Cleisthenes, an Athenian statesman, allowed citizens to participate in public meetings and to engage publically in critiquing the government (Hu, 1997). Cleisthenes is credited with reforming the constitution of ancient Athens and establishing it on a democratic foundation in 508 BC. Etymologically, the term democracy refers to rule by the people. For Aristotle, democracy embodied the spirit of liberty, both political and civil. In reference to Aristotle's politics, Hu (1997) explained that while "the interchange of ruling and being ruled" forms political liberty, "living as you like" constitutes civil liberty; democracy, therefore, comprises both popular sovereignty and individual liberty (p. 350).

Greek thought, therefore, has formed the basis of Western-oriented assumptions and beliefs concerning democracy in terms

of individualism, freedom, and rights. In the West, the concept of citizen is associated with the public realm and the individual with that of the private sphere. This public-private epistemological binary stems from a liberal tradition that envisions society as affording individuals opportunities to fulfill their goals through individual freedom, property ownership, and privatization with minimal governmental interference (Cohen, 1982). Weber, for example, advanced the notion of citizen as an autonomous political subject and linked democracy to individual freedom and civility (Kubow, 2007). In his historical analysis of Western perspectives on democracy and citizenship, Turner (1990) argued that German philosophical orientations linked social rights of citizenship with the development of the democratic civil society (die bürgliche Gesellschaft). The citizen is envisioned as one who leaves the rural area for the urban setting and whose membership to the state (a political space associated with "the historical embodiment of reason") (Turner, 1990, p. 204) subordinates, or in some cases eradicates, gemeinschaft membership within an ethnic group (ethnie) (Smith, 1986; Turner, 1990).

Distinct from scientism premised on objectivity, ubuntu's epistemological assumptions about reality embrace the sacred as well as the empirical and include ways of knowing based on intuition, experience, inspiration, and revelation (Bhola, 2002). While Weber advanced the notion of an autonomous citizen within Western democratic states, different philosophical and cultural assumptions operate in South Africa, where the individual is viewed as not being separate from, but rather embedded in, the community into which one is born. As Swanson (2015) has argued, ubuntu is a democratic ecology of being—a lived expression, a transcendent ethicality, and a relationality that stands in contrast to a detached view of self. Powerfully, Tutu (1999) described the internalization of the African worldview of ubuntu as follows:

> It is not, "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong. I participate, I share." A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed or treated as if they were less than who they are. (p. 31)

There are numerous challenges to the acceptance of ubuntu, however, as an organizing principle in South African schools and society. This is partially because non-Africans often attach sparse value to indigenous African knowledge systems. For example, some dismiss ubuntu as being merely a pedagogy of resistance developed by Africans in response to the psychological oppression of apartheid; others assert that ubuntu, as a philosophy, is stuck in the past. Richardson (2008) argued that ubuntu is used in a decontextualized and universal manner, while others maintain that it is localized and, therefore, culturally relative. Furthermore, Matolino and Kwindingwi (2013) contended that ubuntu's adoption can lead to a monolithic view wherein African life is "hegemonic in its pursuit of a particularized African idealized mode of being" (p. 199). For Karenga (2004), ubuntu is a

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1   The Nguni languages are a group of Bantu languages spoken in southern Africa and include Xhosa, Zulu, Swazi, Hlubi, Phuthi, and Ndebele.

philosophical belief system to guide ethical behavior, characterized by relationships premised upon respect, care, justice, interdependence, and solidarity that contribute to the "orderedness of being" (p. 191). Thus, traditional African values such as ubuntu should not be discredited or deemed insignificant merely because they are not always realized in practice (Nicolson, 2008).

In the present study, democratic knowledge is defined as the awareness and justified beliefs of South African teachers, who live in a state guided by constitutional principles of equality, which espouses adherence to rule of law and promotes active participation in the political process, as well as freedom of speech and movement. Since neither South Africa nor the continent of Africa is homogenous, democracy does not constitute a single unique set of institutions (Letseka, 2012). This article aims to examine the understandings of democracy held by Xhosa teachers, who represent a historically marginalized group. As teachers at primary and intermediate schools in a township community, their epistemological orientations and lived experiences enable reflection on global and local perspectives about democracy and the implications for learners' development as democratic citizens. The teachers' responses support Morrow's (2007) belief in ubuntu's potential to foster a shared moral discourse. Our intent, therefore, is to expose the gap between what is known about ubuntu and citizenship, as highlighted in existing scholarship and from practitioner perspectives reflected in this contemporary empirical research project.

## Methodology

Epistemology is the study or theory of the origin, nature, method, and limits of knowledge. Our own positionality as researchers is to not restrict democracy to scientism (Baez & Boyle, 2009) or to view citizenship from solely Western perspectives, but rather to consider the ways in which democracy is constructed through the epistemological or knowledge bases of some Xhosa teachers. In discussing indigenous democratic perspectives, it is important to recognize that knowledge production is socially situated and "affected by the socially-located interests and perspectives of the knowledge producers" (Robertson, 2013, p. 166). Accordingly, the role of the township in political activism during the apartheid era in particular, in conjunction with South African historical conditions in general, shapes this case study. The township, located approximately 20 kilometers outside Cape Town's city center in the Western Cape province, was the first established during apartheid. It's population of approximately 50,000 residents is primarily composed of Xhosa, who constitute South Africa's second largest indigenous group, in addition to numerous undocumented individuals who reside in squatter camps or informal settlements within and outside the township's boundaries. Challenges commonly cited by the study participants include poverty, unemployment, crime, and high student dropout rates.

To ascertain the constructions of democracy held by educators, the lead author conducted a qualitative case study over a three-month period among 50 teachers (34 female, 16 male) from each of the seven primary and intermediate schools in the aforementioned township. Each school principal asked his or her respective teachers if they would be interested in participating in the study. The principals were willing to have their schools participate because the lead author had obtained research permission from the Western Cape Department of Education. The teacher participants, who taught grades K–9, possessed between 2 months and 30 years of teaching experience, ranged in age from 20 to 69 years, and taught numerous subjects, including languages such as Afrikaans, English, and Xhosa, in addition to art and culture, economics, geography, history, life orientation, mathematics, science, social studies, and technology (see Table 1). Participants were asked to describe their understanding of

**Table 1.** Xhosa Teacher Participant Demographics

| School | Gender | Age | Teaching Experience | Grade Levels Taught | Subjects Taught |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Male (1) | 30–39 | 9 years | 7, 8 | Science, English |
| 1 | Male (2) | 30–39 | 2 months | 5, 7, 8 | Mathematics, Natural Science, Geography, Afrikaans |
| 1 | Male (3) | 40–49 | 13 years | 5 | Natural Science, Economics, Technology |
| 1 | Female (1) | 50–59 | 28 years | 1 | Life Skills, Numeracy, Literacy |
| 1 | Female (2) | 40–49 | 26 years | 4 | All learning areas |
| 2 | Female (1) | 40–49 | 1 year | 2 | All learning areas |
| 2 | Female (2) | 40–49 | 12 years | 2 | All learning areas |
| 2 | Female (3) | 20–29 | 1 year | 1 | All learning areas |
| 2 | Female (4) | 30–39 | 11 years | 1 | All learning areas |
| 2 | Female (5) | 40–49 | 12 years | 3 | All learning areas |
| 2 | Female (6) | 50–59 | 1 year | 3 | All learning areas |
| 3 | Male (1) | 30–39 | 8 years | 5–8 | Social Studies, Natural Science |

**Table 1, continued**

| School | Gender | Age | Teaching Experience | Grade Levels Taught | Subjects Taught |
|--------|--------|-----|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| 3 | Female (1) | 40–49 | 8 years | 6–8 | English |
| 3 | Female (2) | 40–49 | 7 years | 1–8 | Learning support |
| 3 | Female (3) | 40–49 | 18 years | K–8 | Mathematics |
| 3 | Female (4) | 30–39 | 10 years | 4–6 | Social Studies |
| 3 | Female (5) | 40–49 | 16 years | 5–8 | Numeracy, Literacy |
| 3 | Female (6) | 40–49 | 23 years | 2–8 | Life Orientation, Art and Culture, Afrikaans, Geography, History |
| 3 | Female (7) | 30–39 | 9 years | 4 | Mathematics |
| 3 | Female (8) | 30–39 | 5 years | 1–4 | Language, History |
| 3 | Female (9) | 40–49 | 12 years | 5 | Natural Science |
| 4 | Male (1) | 20–29 | 8 years | 1 | All Learning Areas |
| 4 | Male (2) | 50–59 | 20 years | 5–7 | All Learning Areas |
| 4 | Female (1) | 30–39 | 9 years | 2 | All Learning Areas |
| 4 | Female (2) | 40–49 | 11 years | 1–3 | All Learning Areas |
| 4 | Female (3) | 50-59 | 10 years | K–1 | All Learning Areas |
| 4 | Female (4) | 30-39 | 5 years | 4–7 | All Learning Areas |
| 4 | Female (5) | 30-39 | 9 years | K–3 | All Learning Areas |
| 4 | Female (6) | 30-39 | 6 years | 4 | All Learning Areas |
| 5 | Male (1) | 30-39 | 13 years | 7–8 | Social Sciences (i.e., History and Geography) |
| 5 | Male (2) | 30-39 | 13 years | 7–8 | Social Science |
| 5 | Male (3) | 30-39 | 1 year | 4–6 | All Learning Areas |
| 5 | Male (4) | 40–49 | 1 year | 4–6 | English, Natural Science |
| 5 | Female (1) | 60-69 | 15 years | 7–8 | Mathematics, Science |
| 5 | Female (2) | 50–59 | 30 years | K–3 | All Learning Areas |
| 6 | Male (1) | 40–49 | 12 years | 5–6 | English |
| 6 | Male (2) | 40-49 | 12 years | 7–9 | Technology, Economic Management Science |
| 6 | Female (1) | 40–49 | 14 years | 7–9 | Xhosa, Life Orientation |
| 6 | Female (2) | 50-59 | 28 years | 1 | All Learning Areas |
| 7 | Male (1) | 40-49 | 11 years | 5–7 | Natural Science |
| 7 | Male (2) | 30-39 | 8 years | 5–7 | English, Xhosa |
| 7 | Male (3) | 30-39 | 9 years | 6 | Xhosa, Social Sciences |
| 7 | Male (4) | 30-39 | 6 years | 6–8 | Social Sciences, Afrikaans |
| 7 | Female (1) | 30-39 | 12 years | 6, 8 | Mathematics, Science |
| 7 | Female (2) | 30-39 | 6 years | 3, 5 | Technology |
| 7 | Female (3) | 40-49 | 12 years | 4–5, 7–9 | Economic Management Science, History, English |
| 7 | Female (4) | 30-39 | 6 years | 5–7, 8–9 | English, Art and Culture |
| 7 | Female (5) | 30-39 | 10 years | 5, 8–9 | English, Life Orientation, Social Sciences, Art and Culture |
| 7 | Female (6) | 30-39 | 14 years | 1–5 | Art and Culture, Xhosa |
| 7 | Female (7) | 30-39 | 5 years | 7 | Xhosa, Life Orientation |

democracy, to identify values and skills necessary for democratic citizenship, and to consider how formal schooling can contribute to learners' development of democratic dispositions and abilities.

The lead author conducted focus group interviews at the schools, which ranged in length from 45 to 75 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The resultant empirical data, combined with a review of scholarship regarding ubuntu and democracy, constitute the main sources of evidence for this case study. The discussions among the teachers were later analyzed to determine how the findings converged or diverged across participants and schools, and in relation to larger discourses on democracy and ubuntu. This research method provided a forum for the teachers to envision an educational approach wherein values of mutually beneficial cooperation are promoted with the goal of forging a shared humanity. Realization of this vision begins with focusing on localized lived experiences, cultural values, and indigenous epistemologies that shape democratic citizenship.

Therefore, consideration of indigenous epistemologies provides a conceptual framework for exploring how an ubuntu-inspired educational approach based on emancipatory, culturally relevant, and localized perspectives of democratic citizenship might function in a South African context. The particular components of ubuntu, which serves as an analytic to inform the reader about democracy in an African context, include: philosophical and moral orientations that extend well beyond the political and legal constructions of democracy; relational orientations that include cultural group and community, as well as state, relations; and dependence on others for personal growth and the importance of affirmation of others. Taken together, ubuntu enables analysis of democracy as transcendental ethicality, relationality, and lived expression. By deconstructing prevailing modernist epistemologies that often disregard the connection among the heart, mind, and action, the present case study facilitates a theoretical examination of democratic citizenship from indigenous African and non-Western perspectives informed by respect, which entails reciprocity, restoration, and concern for culture and the collective.

Interview transcripts were imported from Microsoft Word into NVivo 10, a software package for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis that facilitates open coding. Based on the three open-ended interview questions, a set of categories were created, namely Meaning of democracy; Character, skills, and values; and Role of formal education. Glaser and Strauss's (2009) constant comparative approach was utilized during the analysis process to extract underlying themes from the three categories, which were represented as nodes in NVivo. A total of 13 nodes were created for the category, Meaning of democracy. To illustrate how the data were analyzed and coded for this category, two excerpts from the transcripts are provided. The first excerpt was placed under an emergent node entitled Equality:

*Before 1994, South Africa was a psychologically sick country . . . Those who were in authority were enjoying life. Then in 1994, things changed, and some of the people didn't like the change because everybody was going to get equality. (F6, School 7)*

Likewise, the second excerpt was placed under an emergent node entitled Rights and freedoms:

*I can say it [democracy] is a kind of freedom of expression, a freedom of religion. People are allowed to participate in everything that concerns their life, in all aspects of life—education, religion, whatever. They are given that opportunity to decide on their own. (M3, School 1)*

Similarly, 14 nodes were created under the second category, Character, skills, and values. For example, the following excerpt from a male teacher (2) at School 6 was placed into a node entitled Respect: "When it comes to values, children must learn respect." Moreover, 17 nodes were created for the third category, Role of formal education. The following excerpt was coded as Demonstration and practice of values:

*[In] our culture we are not encouraged to communicate . . . [but] if they [learners] cannot communicate they will not be able to boost or take this country nowhere, because communication is key. They [learners] can write whatever, but without that we are going nowhere. So I think that we [teachers] need to challenge ourselves and move away and try to do debates [with our students], reports back in class . . . they need to challenge their mind. (F3, School 7)*

Another node example for the third category was entitled Barriers to schools playing a role in the development of values, whereby the interviewees spoke of the conditions under which formal education functions best. After themes were identified and assigned nodes in NVivo, the researchers examined the themes that received the greatest amount of attention from the teachers (see Table 2, next page).

## Results and Discussion

The findings from the focus groups, namely the ways in which the teachers reaffirmed and questioned Western-oriented assumptions and beliefs concerning democracy, highlight the cultural contours of a democracy based on ubuntu (humanness). The teachers described democracy in terms of: (a) freedom of speech, choice, and movement; (b) rights to education, shelter, sanitation, health care, safety, and security; (c) economic and cultural/racial equality; and (d) respect for different races, cultures, generations, and languages. Of these items, the fourth was mentioned most frequently during the interview sessions. For instance, teachers at School 2 expressed concern that children and youth have lost respect for their parents, elders, and cultures. Teachers at School 6 called attention to character traits that are a prerequisite for the development of respect, such as honesty, reliability, self-esteem, confidence, and reverence for the cultures of others. In addition to the general notion of democracy as a government of the people, for the people, and by the people, teachers asserted that a true realization of democracy entails ensuring the economic well-being of all South Africans. In sum, the focus group findings accentuate a need to move from a rights-and-responsibilities discourse to one based on rights, responsibilities, and respect.

In this section, we examine the teachers' dialogues concerning democracy, as well as education for democracy, in light of prior literature regarding ubuntu. Our findings confirm the influence of cultural context and values on teachers' understandings of democracy. The teachers do not want education policy to ignore Xhosa language and values in the classroom but rather to strengthen learners' African identities because knowledge of one's self fosters self-esteem and confidence, which in turn enables learners to contribute meaningfully to their society's democratic development. The results of the interviews are divided into four subsections, wherein ubuntu is examined in terms of: (a) a moral ethic premised upon respect (i.e., humanism); (b) a narrative of return; (c) a culturally relevant path for national development; and (d) a foundation for education in both the home and school.

### Ubuntu as a Moral Ethic Premised Upon Respect

Gade's (2011) historical examination of written discourses concerning ubuntu indicates that it is an African epistemology defined by the ethics of African humanism, a worldview that is connected to the previously mentioned Nguni proverb. Hence, the concept of ubuntu is associated with a deep sense of moral humanism and African consciousness. As a moral theory, ubuntu addresses the interconnectedness of human beings and the responsibilities that arise as a result of that connection (Letseka, 2012). Regarding this notion, Bhengu (1996) suggests that "we exist as human beings only in so far as we belong to a community, and our dignity depends on the extent to which we accept responsibility for other members of our community" (p. 53). Furthermore, Shutte (2008) asserted that this ethic is founded upon an understanding of "human nature, its capacities, and needs" (p. 33).

Indeed, ubuntu's underlying message of responsibility was evident in the interviews conducted with the teachers, who affirmed the importance of respect among community members. However, convergence was also apparent between the teachers' responses and ubuntu literature, particularly with regard to the most appropriate form of democracy for South Africa. For example, a male respondent (3) who teaches grade 5 at School 1 expressed a need to instill a sense of responsibility in South African children and to assist them in developing a sense of self-respect to nurture children and youth who are capable of respecting the people around them, such as their peers and elders.

Teachers frequently cited respect as a prerequisite value orientation for democratic citizenship. This was evident in a poignant statement from a female teacher (6) at School 3, who stated, "I say to my learners that you might have the highest degree, but if you don't have certain values you are a hollow man. Whereby if you want to be involved with other people, always look at the people with respect." Furthermore, she noted that one should seek respectable individuals when choosing associates. She, like the other interviewees across the schools, cited respect for cultural diversity (i.e., universally respecting the beliefs, values, and cultures of others) as a necessary aspect of democratic citizenship. A male teacher (2) at School 5 reinforced this point by remarking that elected officials should respect diverse beliefs and values. Besides respect on the part of the state, a female teacher

**Table 2.** Main Nodes for Each Category in NVivo

| Categories | Main nodes |
|---|---|
| Meaning of democracy | Equality |
| | Right and Freedom |
| | Respect |
| | Indigenous democracy reflecting South African culture |
| | Participation |
| | Responsibilities |
| | Indirect vote |
| | Majority rules |
| | Nation building |
| | Transparency |
| | Innovation |
| | Politics |
| | Unrealistic theory |
| Character, skills, and values | Respect |
| | Communicating one's thoughts freely |
| | Positive self-esteem |
| | Responsibility |
| | Critical and analytical thinking skills |
| | Life skills |
| | Tolerance |
| | Parents' involvement |
| | Discipline |
| | Leadership skills |
| | Cooperation with society and community |
| | Reliability and honesty |
| | Role models |
| | Patriotism |
| Role of formal education | Barriers for schools to play a role in teaching democratic values to students |
| | Applying strong discipline |
| | Collaboration with communities |
| | Encouraging students' self-efficacy towards cultural assets |
| | Demonstration and practice democratic values |
| | Nurturing school ethos |
| | Promoting discussion and debates |
| | Encouraging students' hands on/field experiences |
| | Helping students set their life goals and achieve them |
| | Encouraging collaboration with peers |
| | Customized teaching that reflects students' situations |
| | Sexual education |
| | Service activities |
| | Improving the quality of education |
| | Empowering students' creativity |
| | Doing role play |
| | Improving literacy |

(1) from School 6 emphasized the need for individuals, including students, to accept themselves in order to ultimately be themselves.

Another female teacher (5) from School 3 maintained that democracy as practiced in South Africa diverges from an ubuntu-based conceptualization. Like some of her peers, she expressed concern that individuals have appropriated rights for themselves without considering the rights of others. Such disdain for self-interest is linked to a distrust of Western-centric, rights-oriented conceptualizations of democracy, which often prioritize the individual over others. Ubuntu, in contrast, is centrally concerned with balancing self-respect with respect for others. The teachers at the seven schools associated a disregard for ubuntu with a rise in self-interest and abandonment of respect, which, in their view, spawn materialism, corruption, and violence. As a female teacher (5) from School 3 explained,

*We wanted a democratic country, but it has been a disadvantage in the sense that we are now abusing our rights . . . [and] our children . . . [are not] respecting other people. Believe me, years ago the respect was there for the Black people, but now that we know our rights, as a result the crime outside is really high.*

While acknowledging that South Africans desired a democratic system, the teacher saw the society's transition to have had some disadvantages, and perhaps unintended effects, as some individuals, including youth, have abused their rights. She attributed the abandonment of ubuntu ideals to decreased respect by, and for, Black South Africans and to increased crime rates.

Similarly, the importance of valuing one's cultural heritage and language, which was seen as the starting point for developing in learners self-respect, and ultimately respect for others, was shared by other interviewees. A female teacher (1) at School 6 expressed concern that indigenous youth were losing their native culture and language due to the dominance of English in an increasingly Westernized society. To illustrate this point, she cited Model C schools as an example, which had been available exclusively to White students during the apartheid era, but have since become accessible to anyone with sufficient funds. This newfound accessibility has created a cultural and educational gap between Black families who can and who cannot afford to send their children to such schools, wherein English language education is often perceived to be better and of higher status in the society than isiXhosa. In this way, indigenous children are discouraged from embracing their true identities due to the dominance of English and its deleterious effects on indigenous cultures. A male participant (2) also from School 6 agreed with his colleague's assertions and added that Westernization has negatively affected indigenous children by means of peer pressure, particularly from a racial and cultural standpoint, which has contributed to some youth adopting antisocial behaviors or resorting to gangsterism.

A male teacher (4) from School 7 discussed the relationship between teaching students about democracy and strengthening the value of respect among youths. He argued that his generation's combined experience in both the apartheid and the postapartheid

eras has afforded him and others a unique insight into teaching students about democratic values and encouraging learners to use democracy to bring about social change.

*At the moment there are still portions of people disrespecting others in terms of culture. But I think that, at the end of the day, if we instill that notion [of] democracy on our children, then it helps. As our generation, we know two insights. We know apartheid era and still know democracy era, so all our minds are still conquered; instill [democracy] in the children [so that] some of them will reach for change.*

The ubuntu-inspired notion of democracy described by the teachers in this study is not abstracted from social context but emerges from their phenomenological or lived experiences in the township. The practice of ubuntu in a democratic society does not entail the habitual application of rules and principles, but encompasses practical-moral knowledge for making context-sensitive judgments (Mkhize, 2008). For these teachers, democracy cannot be separated from oneself (i.e., techne, or technical knowledge) and is sustained only when integrated into an individual's being or personhood (i.e., phronesis, or practical-ethical knowledge). An ubuntu-based democracy requires citizens to be fully aware of their social surroundings, and to fulfill duties and obligations in order to establish a stable and balanced society. Ubuntu, therefore, is a theory of right action wherein valuing the worth and dignity of all humans promotes harmony and good relations (Metz, 2007).

The concept of ubuntu can be found in South Africa's constitution, which accords "all human beings a moral status, and considers everyone in principle to be potential members of an ideal family based on loving, or friendly relationships" (Metz & Gaie, 2010, p. 281). A 2001 report from the South African Department of Education entitled Manifesto on Values, Education, and Democracy identifies principles based on the nation's constitution that have been adopted as educational policy, such as democracy, equity, human dignity, respect, reconciliation, and racial and cultural equality. The importance of these values was evident in the teachers' comments. For example, a female teacher (3) at School 3 highlighted the importance of respect in pluralist South Africa, where citizens belong to numerous cultures and religions and speak different languages. She also emphasized the symbiotic relationship among possessing rights, exercising them appropriately, and respect for the state. The notion of respect being reciprocal in nature was echoed by her colleague, female teacher (2), who remarked that respect is "a two-way thing; to gain it, you need to give it." Similarly, a female teacher (4) at the same school also expressed concern that learners place greater emphasis on their rights as opposed to their responsibilities and consequently forget that they must respect others.

### Ubuntu as a Narrative of Return

Some scholars, such as Gade (2011), have asserted that ubuntu functions as a call to Africanization, embodied in an effort to "formulate a foundation of politics that consists of traditional African humanist or socialist [communal] values" (p. 304). Some

researchers, however, have criticized a narrative of return, whereby South Africa is depicted as having been aligned with ubuntu principles in its distant past and then ruptured as a result of racial division during apartheid, contributing to a present state of moral floundering even as the nation democratically transforms. The argument is that the state, in its overemphasis on recognizing indigenous group identities, has downplayed individualism and excluded nonindigenous communities, as well as those indigenous members who do not adhere to their cultural group's norms. Matolino and Kwindingwi (2013), for example, maintained that African cultural communities are "notorious for their dislike of outsiders" and intolerant toward divergent ideas, while simultaneously placing "a high price and value on blood relations in recognizing the other" (p. 202). They further argued that "to be committed to the values of ubuntu is to be committed at the exclusion of other values" (p. 202). Matolino and Kwindingwi's criticisms, however, are not unique to African indigenous groups, and exclusionary practices are present in most groups, cultures, and societies.

Since 1994, there has been increased enthusiasm in reviving values that were either lost or demeaned during colonialism and the apartheid era, as well as renewed interest in, and appreciation of, cultures, identities, and values linked to the African Renaissance. Accordingly, a need to describe and affirm ubuntu as an African ethic has gained momentum (Matolino & Kwindingwi, 2013). In the South African context, ubuntu is part of a "spiritual reconstruction aimed at filling the void of meaning and value left by the dismantled apartheid regime" (Lenta, 2003, p. 156).

A narrative of return is clearly evidenced in the Xhosa teachers' dialogues. The teachers spoke in terms of a distant past predating the apartheid era as a destination of return and, in discussing the meaning of democracy, emphasized that their indigenous cultural rootedness differs from Western culture. To illustrate, a male participant (2), who teaches grades 7–8 at School 5, elaborated even further to ensure that his meaning was not lost on the non-African lead author as she collected the interview data:

> The Western framework doesn't suit us. We don't want to take [from] someone else's culture, [because] people will end up being confused about [what is] the right thing. If you are to take [the Western man's] culture, you are to take his religion and languages. So certain things are important [to keep in mind] when talking with Africans.

He continued by discussing the perceived incompatibility of democracy as practiced in South Africa with the indigenous (i.e., Xhosa) lifestyle, and democracy's failure to reflect traditional South African customs. Furthermore, he noted that South Africans possessed their own form of democracy prior to 1652, which was disposed of through colonization. He asserted that "there is no promotion of Black culture in . . . curricular books such as textbooks." A male colleague (4) who teaches grades 4–6 at the same school concurred, stating that a form of democratic governance was in place prior to the country's interaction with, and influence from, the West:

> In an African context, things were done consulting the Africans and the clan people. They would sit together and come up with a decision and then they would go about how [some]thing is going to work, when it will be done, and things will go accordingly [so that] people, when they are busy with the festivities, they will know their role. Mostly now [with] the White culture, change in South Africa is from education. Education—we think that from the West it will be good for them [learners], but in the end [it is not].

Rather than a Western model, the teachers spoke of democracy in light of their African indigenous identities while adhering to ubuntu as a working principle for guiding their society toward democratization. For instance, a female second-grade teacher (2) from School 2 believed that citizenship begins by knowing "where you come from" or one's origins. Likewise, a female first-grade teacher (4) at the same school maintained that a sense of pride regarding one's culture and identity was necessary for a democracy, asserting that indigenous peoples should be proud of their Blackness and remain determined. Concerning the role of formal education in teaching indigenous peoples about their African roots, a male teacher (1) at School 7 remarked that, while educators can teach students about their roots, learners must also understand the complete history of South Africa. Toward that end, a male participant (1) at School 3 asserted that Xhosa "need to inculcate a sense of voice in our own country, so that [they] won't allow anyone the chance to determine who you are."

In the focus group dialogues, many teachers argued that democratic ideals existed and were practiced in South Africa prior to the introduction of its Westernized form. For example, a male teacher (3) who teaches fifth grade at School 1 stated that contemporary South African democracy deviates from ubuntu ideals. In the excerpt that follows, he elaborated on his conceptualization of precolonial democracy, drawing parallels between kings and their counselors and contemporary democratic committees and their cabinets:

> It [democracy] has been in Africa for a very long time, you know. There were no counselors or mayors or presidents or prime ministers of any sort. But it is very interesting to note that long ago they killed off chiefs, kings, queens . . . The king or the queen or the chief used to [give] control to the people, and the people at the end of the day [would] come up with some suggestions and come [to some] decisions . . . The king or the counselors, they and the people, would form a committee, today called a cabinet . . . Those people used to act as the advisor to the king. That alone was quite explicit that the king did not just impose the ideas in their head and whatever he thought was okay for the people. He would respect the people and listen to them and actually hear how they feel about every issue on the table. That is why I am saying that it [democracy] is not a new concept. Even in homes, parents used to consult their kids in a manner that would today qualify as democratic. We [Xhosa] are finding that definition of the word; we don't have to take it from the textbook. The definition differs maybe from place to place, from town to town, or even maybe from continent to continent.

Thus, teachers, such as the male educator (3) from School 1, do not necessarily believe that it is appropriate for teachers and learners to accept textbook definitions of democracy and feel that democracy's meaning can differ according to one's city, country, or even continent. A female participant (2) who teaches grades K–3 at School 5 did not want her peers to compare Westernized conceptualizations of democracy to her own cultural group, since Xhosa possess a unique heritage and form of democracy that is practiced in a manner deemed acceptable by them. As indicated by the teachers on numerous occasions throughout the focus groups, they do not believe that contemporary South African democracy reflects their cultural heritage, largely due to the influence of state-sanctioned injustice during the apartheid era, wherein Black culture and values were blatantly undermined. Teacher discourse across the focus groups, therefore, emphasized the importance of restoring human dignity and values of humanness. This resonated with Letseka (2012) who, drawing upon the work of Ake (1993), asserted that "democracy has to be recreated in the context of the given realities in political arrangements which fit the cultural context, without sacrificing its values and inherent principles" (p. 52).

### Ubuntu as a Culturally Relevant Path for National Development

To address the numerous social issues that emerged with the institutionalized racial discrimination of the apartheid era, South Africa must strive for inclusivity to develop itself as a nation. Given the coexistence of numerous races, cultures, and languages, subsequent steps toward national development should prioritize, as the teacher interviews suggested, identifying a means to encourage cooperation in order to achieve greater social justice. As a philosophy built upon principles of respect, self-understanding, care, justice, interdependence, and solidarity, ubuntu is symbolic as an antithesis to the degrading nature of colonialism and apartheid; consequently, it has earned considerable attention as a possible path toward national development. By applying ubuntu's ideals, the evil nature of racial and financial dehumanization, which characterized colonialism and the apartheid system, can be eradicated. To establish "a more fully human social order, [and] a society in which all people are able to develop to their full potential" (Shutte, 2008, p. 33), ubuntu was cited by the teachers to be a key aspect of democracy and essential to societal transformation in postapartheid South Africa.

The teachers who were interviewed for this study reside in a township that was marginalized during the apartheid era; consequently, their responses concerning the meaning of democracy focus heavily on the importance of education and economic, racial, and gender equality. For example, a female teacher (1) at School 6 asserted that all citizens should "have a say in the country irrespective of race, language, or age." Moreover, she felt that citizens should be treated equally by the judicial system and be able to "cast a vote or elect leaders." The teacher also stressed that democracy should enable citizens to liberate themselves from the oppressor and allow indigenous peoples to practice religion freely as a means of educating themselves.

Although ubuntu could facilitate the normative equality needed to guide postapartheid South Africa toward development, the teachers nevertheless cited numerous social challenges rooted in contemporary political and economic inequity that hinder such progress. While many teachers were indeed hopeful that equality could be achieved through democracy, several teachers remained skeptical about its implementation. For example, a male teacher (2) at School 5 agreed with his colleagues' opinions concerning democracy, but asserted that "democracy is a theory, not a practice." As a male teacher (2) at School 6 explained, the unequal distribution of wealth in South Africa continues to be a hindrance to liberty and, therefore, democracy. He noted that most parliamentary members and some White people remain rich, as do foreigners such as Indians and Zimbabweans, while most Xhosa citizens live in poverty:

> If you look at the economic development of the country, who is getting the good? Most of the people are still not liberated. Those people who are in parliament and some White people are still rich. So we need to distribute it [wealth and resources] more and tell them [indigenous peoples] that we must fight for the economy of this country.

The issue of inequality was discussed in relation to school resources as well. For example, a female participant (1) who teaches grades 7–9 at School 6 noted the disparities by asserting that, while South Africa claims to be a democratic country, students and teachers in the township community are relegated to cold classrooms due to the inability to pay for electricity. Such conditions are not universal, however, as noted by a male teacher (1) who teaches grades 5–7 at School 7:

> If you look at buildings of the White schools, they are not the same as ours. There are many opportunities that learners at White schools are afforded that are not available to our students. If the government can address these issues, there would be some changes in our [quality of] education.

According to the teachers, both economic and political justice are democratic ideals aligned with ubuntu's fundamental aims. The teachers' overall assertion that democracy in South Africa has diverged from their ubuntu spirit is reflected in Ake's (1993) argument, as presented by Letseka (2012):

> [Africans] do not separate political democracy from economic democracy, or for that matter from economic well-being. They see their political empowerment, through democratisation, as an essential part of getting the economic agenda right at last and ensuring that their development project is managed better and its rewards more evenly distributed. (p. 52)

For Bhengu (1996), ubuntu is the sole philosophy and value system capable of achieving true social justice. Specifically, he argued that "political freedom is meaningless [in South Africa] without economic well-being" and, thus, "all socio-economic policies and

systems should be judged on whether they build or take away personal dignity and a sense of self-worth" (p. 56).

### Ubuntu as a Foundation for Education in the Home and School

In formal schooling, the concept of ubuntu is explicitly highlighted in the curriculum for life orientation (LO) classes, which were established by the South African Department of Education following the end of apartheid. LO aims to actualize ubuntu's principles through development of the self in relation to others and society. According to the South African Department of Education's (2003) National Curriculum Statement, the goal of LO is to "enable learners to know how to exercise their constitutional rights and responsibilities, to respect the rights of others, and to value diversity, health, and well-being" (p. 9). This case study confirms and acknowledges the need to strengthen the LO curriculum in order to establish democracy in South Africa, an aim that is in agreement with indigenous, ubuntu cultural values.

Nevertheless, some scholars have argued that LO as currently practiced fails to fulfill its desired goals due to various structural shortcomings. Prinsloo (2007), for example, examined the perceptions of school principals and LO teachers concerning the curriculum's effectiveness. The study cited insufficient parental involvement and lack of role models and proper value systems as factors hindering the creation of a supportive climate for LO teachers. In addition, problems related to communities, cultural diversity, and departmental policies were also highlighted, as Prinsloo (2007) noted recurring complaints regarding students' lack of respect for teachers or school rules, severe poverty, limited training for LO teachers, and overcrowded classrooms.

Similarly, the responses of the Xhosa teachers in this present case study confirmed many of the claims made by Prinsloo (2007). Teachers often cited insufficient parental involvement in the educational process as a barrier to assisting students in the internalization of values important to becoming democratic citizens. The teachers also deemed responsibility and respect to be closely related, and considered value-oriented education to be a stepping-stone for democratic education, both at home and in the school. Regarding the need for greater parental involvement in the educational process, teachers identified parental illiteracy and the legacy of apartheid as key contributing factors. As a female first-grade teacher (1) at School 1 explained, students in the township are "coming from an environment where many parents are illiterate, [and] they know nothing about school." Consequently, the parents cannot meaningfully assist teachers in nurturing their children's academic competencies. In that regard, a female teacher (5) at School 7 likened schooling to the potjie, a three-legged African cooking pot:

> When it comes to the parents, some of them could make a decision that could impact highly on the kids. Most of the parents are illiterate. Most of our learners come from poor families, and they do not get support at home. Education is supposed to be a three-legged pot: the educator, the learner, and the parent. If they could all work together, I think some of the skills could come with them from home.

A female teacher (4) from the same school agreed with her colleague adding, "It takes three to make a person: the teacher, the parent, and the child."

The Xhosa teachers also stressed the importance of teaching respect in the home, as well as its reinforcement at school. As a female teacher (2) from School 4 explained, "In terms of respect, parents should also be involved, because they are the other people who are raising the children." Likewise, a female first-grade teacher (1) at School 1 argued that insufficient parental involvement inhibits students from internalizing the prerequisite values for becoming democratic citizens: "The problem is at home with the parents. They [students] are only taught in school how to respect properties and how to behave; but when they get home, there is nobody looking after [them]." A female teacher (3) at School 3 agreed, stating, "The issue of respect is not a one-off thing . . . it is a process. It is an on-going thing. It is a kind of primary education that starts at home from mother to son, [and] from daughter to mother." She commented further that respect requires "primary learning at home and secondary learning at school."

The success of LO education is influenced significantly by students' socioeconomic conditions, in addition to inequalities rooted in the legacy of apartheid. Ahmed, Flisher, Mathews, Mukoma, and Jansen (2009) contended that remnants of apartheid in educational practices make it difficult to envision a positive outcome for LO, largely due to the poor quality of education in underequipped, predominantly Black schools. The researchers also emphasized the challenges faced by teachers related to HIV/AIDS and sex education. Specifically, they noted that the effectiveness of educating students about such topics is heavily influenced by religion, societal norms, and teachers' personal beliefs—all of which tend to advocate abstinence.

Remnants of apartheid-era economic and political inequalities have affected extracurricular school activities as well. This is reflected in the absence of sports activities (e.g., netball, soccer, tennis, and volleyball), equipment, and facilities in which learners can engage in productive and healthy habits—both in and out of school. Although schools attempt to engage children in sports and musical activities whereby students might learn respect and proper behavior, the absence of suitable facilities contributes to youths partaking in anti-social behavior instead. Teachers also attempt to function as role models for learners, although numerous challenges such as abuse, prostitution, student absence, and misappropriation of welfare grants by parents undermine these efforts. Accordingly, the teachers in this study acknowledged the need for school psychologists to investigate such problems and for guidance counselors who can assist students in identifying future career paths.

Much discussion ensued in the focus groups concerning the importance of role models and instilling respect in learners. However, a male teacher (2) at School 1 was particularly critical of mass media's negative impact on students. Concerning television's possible influence on young people's sexual behavior, he stated the following:

*Television is causing quite a mess in our societies. We . . . often see our kids watching television [programs] where people are making sex—even at half past seven [when] kids are still in the room . . . [The media] are creating programs where kids, even at the age of 15, [are] sexually active.*

He believes that television not only contributes to youth pregnancy and HIV/AIDS but contributes to violence as well:

*In our country, when you [turn on] the television you see a gun. Each and every person has a gun, and, I don't know [why] there must [always] be a gun. My son has been wanting me to buy [him] a toy gun. A gun, as we have seen these days, has power, you know. When you have a gun, you want to be a boss in the street.*

The teacher concluded that, as with sex, an overabundance of guns and violence portrayed in mass media contributes to youths reenacting what they see in their local communities.

In the Western Cape township where this case study was conducted, a limited amount of time (i.e., roughly 5% of the school year) is dedicated to LO education, a branch of the national curriculum wherein life skills and issues affecting local communities, such as HIV/AIDS, are addressed. However, values are perhaps of greater importance to students than pure knowledge. Bhengu (1996) remarked that:

*Just like culture, if [ubuntu] is not consciously and continuously promoted through teaching it at schools and actively reinforcing it through the public media and cultural events, people [will] forget it's meaning and lose sight of it, as many people seem to have done already. (p. 6)*

Hence, the teachers who participated in the interviews asserted that LO must be given greater priority in the national curriculum in order to instill positive social values in learners, such as respect for themselves, elders, and peers, as well as other cultures and religions.

## Conclusion

This article has considered how ubuntu, an African indigenous epistemology, offers different ontological perspectives that can inform discourses on democracy and citizenship. Conceiving of human beings' existence in light of culture and the collective frames democracy from relational rather than individualist positions. The views expressed by the teachers in this study depict a construction of democratic citizenship comprising freedom, communal values, and self-respect. These concepts that are part of indigenous epistemologies contribute to understanding the cultural contours informing citizenship education in a Xhosa township. The results suggest that principles of ubuntu are central to what the teacher participants believe should guide schooling in South Africa for a culturally-informed democracy to be actualized.

Furthermore, the teachers believe that more time should be dedicated to LO education, wherein students acquire life skills and learn about religious differences, about issues affecting their

community (e.g., HIV/AIDS), and about their own culture and the cultures of others. For these South African teachers, democracy is a process that requires participation and involvement, as well as liberation from the bonds of racism and classism. Moreover, the teachers who participated in this study maintained that democracy is cultivated both from within the person and in relation to his or her community. Hence, the study participants believe that democratic citizenship is to be based on a collective ethos characterized by both inclusivity and autonomy.

The non-formalist methodological approach of working on the ground to better understand participants' meanings of democracy and ubuntu in relation to Western humanist and the South African state discourses reveals conjunctures and disjunctures among perceptions, practices, and more decontextualized policy and institutional discourses. While rights-based dialogue is a part of the teachers' discourse on democracy, their responses reveal that rights must not only be accompanied by responsibilities but also by respect. The teachers' epistemological orientations support the belief in ubuntu's potential to foster a shared moral discourse. The ideas expressed in the teacher dialogues are indicative of a hope for ubuntu to take shape in a postcolonial environment characterized by modernity. Given ubuntu's emphasis on reaching a consensus based on universal respect, we, like Nicolson (2008), believe its ideals can lend to the creation of a balanced and stable society.

Accordingly, future research should investigate the implementation of ubuntu as an educational value in a South African educational policy framework aimed at democratic citizenship development. More research is also needed to consider whether ontological and epistemological problems exist in using ubuntu in non-African contexts. For instance, might different details and meta terms such as democracy also be told of the tensions of democratic citizenship between local perceptions and the normalized, master discourses in Western societies? The goal of such inquiries is to consider the value of ubuntu as an analytic to examine democracy's epistemological functions and its use as a guide for democratic practice.

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