
Democracy & Education

Drawing on the Past to Open Up Possible Futures.

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Abstract

This article is a response to a qualitative study that examined how the indigenous African notion of *ubuntu* informs how some school teachers in a Black township in South Africa conceptualize Western-oriented narratives of democracy. While the study acknowledges important differences in how *ubuntu* is understood and defined, the author argues that it nonetheless tends to overlook them in order to harness *ubuntu* as a force for positive social change and national development. The author argues that *ubuntu* could potentially serve as a powerful cultural force for change, but this requires a context in which some of the moral qualities associated with *ubuntu* are more widely practiced and visible in communities and in the policies and practices of government at all levels. It also requires a reconceptualization of *ubuntu* as an inclusive and nonessentialized notion that is responsive to the practical needs of contemporary South African society.

This article is in response to

Kubow, P. & Min, M. (2016). The cultural contours of democracy: Indigenous epistemologies informing South African citizenship. *Democracy & Education* 24(2), Article 5.

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IN “THE CULTURAL Contours of Democracy,” Kubow and Min (2016) delineated a qualitative case study they conducted with school teachers in a township near Cape Town in the Western Cape province of South Africa. The purpose of the study was to examine how the indigenous African notion of *ubuntu* informs their conceptions of Western-oriented narratives of democracy. Over a three-month period, the authors recruited a diverse group of participants and conducted focus group interviews with 50 Xhosa teachers (Xhosa is the second largest ethnic group and one of 11 official languages in South Africa) from all seven primary and intermediate schools in a Xhosa-majority township, which they did not identify.

Fostering democratic values, beliefs, and dispositions among young learners is vitally important in contemporary South Africa, which is deeply divided by extreme levels of poverty and inequality in income, wealth, and opportunity. The persistence of

depression-level rates of unemployment, especially for Blacks (a term of racial solidarity under apartheid that signifies Africans, Indians, and Coloreds), widespread labor unrest, growing resentment and violence toward immigrants from other African countries, pervasive government corruption, and nationwide student protests over unaffordable university fees have put tremendous stress on the nascent democratic culture and institutions of South Africa. In response to increasing tensions and class conflict, there

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has been a concerted effort to revive and restore moral virtues and principles associated with ubuntu, which were repressed under colonialism and apartheid.

What Is Ubuntu?

Ubuntu is an indigenous African notion, which has been variously described as the process of becoming an ethical human being, as a social practice, as the possession of certain moral qualities, and as an ethos or philosophy (Enslin & Horsthemke, 2004; Gade, 2012; Higgs, 2003; Kunnie, 2000; Letseka, 2012, 2000; Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013; Mkhize, 2008; Richardson, 2008; Sindane, 2000; Venter, 2004; Waghid & Smeyers, 2012). It is a dynamic and protean concept that takes on new meanings in different contexts and historical periods and is often associated with “moral norms and virtues, such as kindness, generosity, compassion, benevolence, courtesy, and respect and concern for others” (Letseka, 2000, p. 180). Thus, ubuntu is not a fixed or universal notion but one that has been continually adapted to address the needs and realities of African societies.

According to Gade (2012), ubuntu was first associated with the Nguni proverb (Nguni is a language group that includes Xhosa and Zulu) *umuntu ngumuntu ngabatu*, often translated as “a person is a person through other persons,” during the transition from apartheid to democracy in the early 1990s. The proverb signifies that one’s humanity is inextricably bound up with the humanity of other human beings, in which the “Other is a mirror that casts my image toward me” (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012, p. 13). This sense of interconnectedness means that individuals have a mutual responsibility to appeal to, and affirm, the humanity of the Other. However, in the latter half of the 1990s, the meaning of ubuntu shifted away from the moral qualities of a person and began to be defined as an ethic or philosophy. The move to a decontextualized and abstract notion of ubuntu coincided with, and reinforced, the national project of reconciliation.

South Africans of African descent, Gade (2012) argued, typically define ubuntu in two ways: “as a moral quality of a person,” as someone who possesses and practices certain moral virtues; and “as a phenomenon according to which persons are interconnected,” as an “ethic, a philosophy, African humanism, or a worldview” (p. 487). In the African context, the notion of humanism, which Letseka (2000) described as “a philosophy that sees human needs, interests and dignity as of fundamental importance and concern,” refers to people who belong to a community and is often associated with moral qualities such as caring, empathy, forgiveness, tolerance, human dignity, and solidarity that reflect the fundamental importance of social bonds and relationships, of human interconnectedness, in traditional African cultures (p. 182).

However, as Gade (2012) pointed out, there are other notions of ubuntu, which grew out of the struggle against apartheid, that are exclusionary and define personhood as someone who is Black, who has the willingness and ability to fulfill certain obligations to the community, or who exhibits morally acceptable normative behaviors. These exclusionary criteria originated in the need to ensure group survival and solidarity during the liberation struggle and persist as a result of the historical legacy and trauma of

apartheid. While personhood is always “defined in relation to the community,” in some versions of ubuntu, being counted as a person is a moral achievement conferred on individuals by the community (Mkhize, 2008, p. 39). Thus, while Kubow and Min (2016) assumed that ubuntu and Western-oriented notions of democracy are mutually reinforcing and complementary concepts, this is not always the case. Exclusive notions of ubuntu can lead to racial and ethnic segregation and mark certain people and social groups as lacking the capacity to possess moral qualities associated with ubuntu and as being unworthy of inclusion in the imagined community of persons.

Gade (2012) argued that both definitions have consequences and are useful in different contexts. While exclusionary definitions can lead to group segregation and social conflict, inclusionary ones can “hinder group members from fighting back against those who threaten the group” (p. 500). While Kubow and Min (2016) acknowledged that “a narrative of return is clearly evidenced in the Xhosa teachers’ dialogues,” they did not consider how critiques of the narrative, which they briefly discussed, might inform their analysis of how these teachers conceptualize ubuntu (p. 8). Similarly, although they noted that some indigenous African groups engage in “exclusionary practices,” they did not examine how these practices could affect appeals to ubuntu in other cultural contexts and as a path for national development (p. 8). Thus, while the authors clearly recognized some important distinctions between different versions of ubuntu, they tended to overlook them in an attempt to harness ubuntu’s potential for driving positive social, economic, and educational change in South Africa.

Another issue concerns the question of brokenness, of the possibility of practicing ubuntu in communities that are riven by discord, conflict, and violence, where social and cultural norms are routinely violated, as in many townships in the Cape Flats region near Cape Town, where this research was conducted. Gobodo-Madikizela, an internationally renowned human rights scholar and activist from South Africa, has talked about the brokenness of individuals and communities. She has argued that when norms of behavior that hold communities together are routinely transgressed and the trust between neighbors breaks down, it often leads to escalating crime and violence in which people take justice into their own hands (Ambrosio, 2016). In her view, the long history of racialized violence and trauma under colonialism and apartheid has significantly undermined group solidarity and identity and left many Black South Africans, especially the poor, living in deplorable conditions where moral qualities associated with ubuntu are largely absent.

Contextualizing and Cultivating Ubuntu

What, then, does it mean to appeal to moral qualities associated with ubuntu in this context, at this moment in the history of South Africa? Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013) argued that “ubuntu as an ideology is not well rooted in the ethical experiences of modern people *qua* moral beings” and that it “lacks both the capacity and context to be an ethical inspiration or code of ethics in the present context” (p. 198). They rejected notions of ubuntu linked to the “narrative of return,” to a past unadulterated by colonialism and

apartheid, because it essentializes Black cultures and identities, thereby constraining and limiting the possibility of cultural adaptation and change. Similarly, Richardson (2000) has argued that the “original societies from which these terms are assumed to have sprung are no longer accessible to the people of the modern world, experientially or conceptually” (p. 82). Thus, the social conditions needed to cultivate and instill moral qualities associated with ubuntu are largely absent in present-day South Africa, which is marked by “increasing callous and gratuitous violence, corruption in public office, and materialistic consumerism” (Matolino & Kwindingwi, 2013, p. 199).

According to Mkhize (2008), the traditional African view “is that ethical concerns are practical and experiential; they cannot be separated from the lived experience of the people in question” (p. 35). In traditional African cultures, he argued, “knowing is a relational act. One does not know by standing and observing from a distance” (p. 38). Similarly, Kubow and Min (2016) argued that “ubuntu’s epistemological assumptions about reality” are not premised on the Western idea of objectivity, on the separation of subject and object, self and Other, and “embrace the sacred as well as the empirical and include ways of knowing based on intuition, experience, inspiration, and revelation” (p. 2). The moral qualities associated with ubuntu are rooted in a “holistic conception of life” that seeks to maintain communal unity and solidarity based on “justice, respect, caring, and empathy” (Mkhize, 2008, pp. 38–39). Thus, notions of ubuntu that are disconnected from the needs, concerns, and experiences of communities are likely to fail.

How, then, can the qualities of ubuntu be cultivated in a society in which they are not widely practiced, where there are few models of such behavior? That is, how can people “form the moral character and social skills necessary” to realize ubuntu in communities? (Richardson, 2000, p. 71). As in most countries, there are few public or private spaces in contemporary South Africa where the moral qualities associated with ubuntu can germinate and flourish, especially given that young learners are more likely to appeal to the rights and responsibilities discourse, to legal rights enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa and other official documents, than to embrace the narrative of return to traditional community norms and obligations.

Explication of the Findings

Kubow and Min (2016) wanted to understand how ubuntu, as an indigenous African “epistemic orientation toward individual-society relations,” informs how these teachers “reaffirm and question” Western-orientated assumptions of “individualism, freedom, and rights” in narratives of democracy (p. 2). To examine this relation, they asked 50 Xhosa teachers to talk about how they understand “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” (p. 5).

The findings indicate that these teachers typically described democracy in the Western-orientated language of freedom, rights, and equality but most often cited the ubuntu quality of respect for different races, cultures, and languages. Why did the teachers

repeatedly point to the overwhelming importance of self-respect and of instilling respect for parents, elders, peers, and cultures? This is not a surprising outcome given the increasing class conflict and crime rate in South Africa and that respect for differences is a core ethical value enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa and in the national policy of reconciliation and restorative justice. In other words, this finding reflects the dominant narratives of democracy circulating in contemporary South Africa and the lived experience of the majority of the population. In emphasizing respect for the Other, these teachers rearticulated Western-oriented notions of democracy to make them relevant to their own context, to addressing their particular problems and concerns.

According to Kubow and Min (2016), some teachers claimed that “children and youth have lost respect for their parents, elders, and cultures” (p. 5) that they have abandoned the ubuntu ideal of respect, which has “spawn[ed] materialism, corruption, and violence” and an increase in crime (p. 7). While there may be some merit to this claim, that many young people have “abused their rights” by disregarding their community obligations, this assertion assumes that moral qualities associated with ubuntu are currently present, were widely practiced in the recent past, and have been rejected by young people. However, why would young people take up an abstract concept that seems historically distant and does not comport with their lived experience in communities or in the nation at large?

Kubow and Min (2016) noted that some of these teachers claim that “democracy in South Africa has diverged from their ubuntu spirit,” that the political revolution in South Africa was not accompanied by a similar transformation of the economy, and that the exercise of political rights has not translated into significantly better living conditions for the vast majority of South Africans (p. 9). Democracy has diverged from the spirit of ubuntu, from a fundamental concern with the well-being of others in the community, the teachers argued, because government policies and programs at all levels have not adequately addressed the deep and persistent inequities in South African society. While government corruption has significantly undermined efforts to improve the living conditions of poor South Africans, this claim also assumes that the moral practices associated with ubuntu are part of the lived experience and historical memory of the majority of South Africans. Given the Constitution of South Africa’s humanistic values and principles, one could argue that it is imbued with the spirit of ubuntu but that the political will to translate these moral qualities into concrete policies and practices has been insufficient.

Implications of the Study

What, then, is the significance of this research? According to Kubow and Min (2016), the purpose of the study was 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” (p. 3). In terms of practitioner perspectives, it is my contention that the authors did not adequately examine how these teachers, all of whom are from the same ethnic group, conceptualized ubuntu, and how their particular understandings, based on “localized lived

experiences, cultural values, and indigenous epistemologies,” might differ from the perspectives of individuals and groups in other parts of South Africa (p. 5).

In addition, there are significant disagreements among scholars not only about the definition of ubuntu but about its usefulness in underpinning notions of democracy in South Africa (Kubow & Min, 2016, p. 1). For example, Enslin and Horsthemke (2004) argued that there is nothing distinctly or uniquely African about ubuntu; that some of the values and principles attributed to ubuntu, such as a concern for the environment, are “dubious”; and that it is “conceptually and practically associated with a long and profound tradition of humanist concern, caring, and compassion, also prominent in Western thought” (pp. 548–549). Conversely, Sindane (2000) argued that “democracy was practiced in various forms” in precolonial African societies, that remnants of these systems “survived years of colonialism and oppression” in South Africa, and that “such practice was based on the philosophy of *ubuntu*” (p. 31). Because ubuntu has the potential to foster tolerant social attitudes, he argued, “notions of democracy and *ubuntu* (can) intersect, inform each other and facilitate togetherness” (p. 41). Letseka (2012) made a similar point, arguing that the “normative values implicit in ubuntu have the potential to provide a distinctive underpinning for democracy in South Africa” (p. 52) because “some of the values implicit in ubuntu coincide with some of the values implicit in the country’s constitution” (p. 49).

While scholars may disagree, these teachers clearly saw points of intersection between qualities typically associated with ubuntu and liberal democracy. The findings illustrate how these teachers draw on their understandings of ubuntu to reaffirm and reconstruct narratives of democracy. That is, rather than see these concepts as inconsistent or contradictory, given that ubuntu is based on communal values and group obligations, while liberal democracy is primarily concerned with personal liberty and the rights of autonomous individuals, these teachers viewed them as complementary. What Kubow and Min (2016) found, then, was not an effort to interrupt and displace Western-oriented notions of democracy but to rearticulate and harness them to address pressing issues and practical problems in South African society.

The most significant finding is that most of these teachers added a quality often associated with ubuntu, respect for differences, to their understandings of liberal democracy, while rearticulating their definition of ubuntu as “the virtue of being human *premised upon respect* [emphasis added]” (Kubow & Min, 2016, p. 1). In doing so, the authors claimed that these teachers facilitated a move from “a rights and responsibilities discourse to one based on rights, responsibilities, and respect” (Kubow & Min, 2016, p. 5). While there may be some merit to this claim, the move does not necessarily interrupt the underlying assumptions of liberal democracy or fundamentally alter the “epistemic orientation toward individual-society relations” (Kubow & Min, 2016, p. 2) in South Africa. In my view, this reveals more about how these teachers view the current political, social, economic, and spiritual crisis in South Africa than about their desire to interrogate Western-oriented narratives of democracy.

Ubuntu and Education

What, then, do these findings suggest about educating young learners for democracy and democratic citizenship? How might the localized notions of democracy articulated by these teachers enable learners to form democratic dispositions and identities? Kubow & Min (2016) noted that “ubuntu is explicitly highlighted in the curriculum for life orientation (LO) classes” that were established after the end of apartheid. The goal of the LO classes, according to the South African Department of Education, 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. 10). These are certainly laudable goals, but which version of ubuntu informs the curriculum? Is it a notion linked to a narrative of return to a traditional past, to an authentic Black culture and identity, or is it one that is dynamic and inclusive, that opens up new possibilities for individual and group transformation? Does the curriculum seek to promote moral values associated with ubuntu by addressing ethical issues that are practical and experiential? It is not clear why Kubow and Min (2016) pointed to the curriculum for life orientation classes as an example, since it promotes the rights and responsibilities discourse that they opposed and sought to displace.

Matolino & Kwiringwi (2013) argued against what they saw as the “public, widespread, and concerted ‘ubuntu-isation’” (p. 197) of South African society, that is, against the persistent and ubiquitous appeals to ubuntu that seek to promote social harmony and forge a new Black identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Like the term *diversity* in the United States, ubuntu has been appropriated by various individuals and groups in South Africa for their own ends, which has degraded its meaning and diminished its social currency. However, ubuntu remains a powerful cultural force and ideal for many Black South Africans precisely because it is deeply rooted in traditional African ways of life.

However, can appeals to ostensibly authentic African values and identities, drawn from small, mostly homogenous, underdeveloped rural villages, which are held together by bonds of mutual recognition and interdependence, have any relevance to young learners in present-day South Africa? If so, what role should formal education play in this effort? Is it possible to reconcile the cultivation of autonomous individuals and traditional African values and identities as educational goals? My own view is that a reimagined notion of ubuntu could play a role in educating learners for democracy and democratic citizenship and that certain moral qualities—such as respect, care, empathy, compassion, fairness, and an overriding concern for the welfare of others in the community—that are common across different versions of ubuntu, may have social resonance and could contribute to the reconstruction of South Africa society.

Despite the appropriation of ubuntu by some public and private interests for their own purposes, many people, especially Blacks, strongly identify with its communal values and beliefs, if only as abstract ideals. In my view, an inclusive, nonessentialist, and dynamic version of ubuntu could potentially contribute to educating learners for democratic citizenship. However, appeals to a reimagined notion of ubuntu must be accompanied by significant and

observable changes in the distribution of income, wealth, and opportunity in South Africa, or it will simply become an empty slogan that seeks to accommodate people to unjust social conditions.

For ubuntu to be taken up and embraced by the “born free” generation, those born after the end of apartheid in 1994, it must be inclusive, nonessentialist, and readily observable in government policies and programs that demonstrate a fundamental concern for the economic well-being of the majority of the population. Rather than appeal to abstract ideals, teachers could cultivate democratic habits of mind and dispositions by employing pedagogical approaches that enable young learners to experience democratic values and practices firsthand through participatory, culturally relevant, and cooperative forms of education.

In the end, efforts to impose a singular definition of ubuntu, to revive and restore traditional values and authentic Black identities, must be resisted. Ubuntu must once again be modified, adapted, and reimagined for a new time to make it relevant and useful in a modern, increasingly urbanized, multiracial South Africa, which is marked by the hegemony of neoliberal free-market capitalism. In my view, a rearticulated version of ubuntu could provide teachers, learners, and others with a shared moral vocabulary and discourse that could serve as the basis for deliberations about the reconstruction of South African society.

As Gramsci (1971) argued, hegemony is never fixed but must be continually maintained and is always contested. In my view, ubuntu could potentially be a powerful force in educating learners for democratic citizenship—if coupled with a serious and sustained national effort to address the economic needs of the half of the population that has been left behind. The monetary incentives and gravitational pull of narrow self-interest and personal greed fostered by neoliberal free-market capitalism will be a persistent challenge to cultivating the moral qualities associated with a rearticulated notion of ubuntu, which is firmly grounded in the present-day needs, realities, and challenges of South Africa. However, as multiple crises deepen, opportunities may arise to infuse the moral imagination of sectors of the population with a new spirit of ubuntu.

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