

## **BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT: CONFLICT IN SCHOOLS, AN UBUNTU/RA PERSPECTIVE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Public schools in South Africa have been coming under increasing pressure from concerned stakeholders in the face of rising and extraordinary incidents of student conflict and violence they have had to address and cope with in recent years. One of the concerns is that despite policies abolishing corporal punishment being in place, schools still tend to resort to corporal punishment or other equally harsh disciplinary measures as a means of enforcing discipline. Indications are that public schools seem to be trapped in the legacy of the Apartheid system that was characterised by discriminatory laws that were enforced through inhumane disciplinary measures. As a result discipline in schools remains mainly punitive and at the same time concerns regarding learner hostility are rising.

Of interest is that, while schools seem to be struggling with developing effective and humane ways of addressing conflict, Government and other public arenas have, in contrast, come up with a strong call for and reassertion of humanitarian, traditional principles and values of ubuntu as a means of bringing about harmony and reconciliation in the country. One example is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, through which, the leader, Archbishop Desmond Tutu adopted the principles of ubuntu in an attempt to bring about harmony and healing as well as transcend the deeply ingrained racial barriers that came to define South Africa during the apartheid era. It was in the same spirit of ubuntu that Mandela led his new government in 1994, with the aim of bringing about racial harmony and establishing an ethos of nation building. Similarly, policy changes in South Africa at government level are driven and centred along ubuntu principles that advocate humanitarian values to redress past apartheid policies.

However, issues of indiscipline, violence and disaffection in schools are not unique to South Africa. Developing research and practice shows that elsewhere schools have begun applying Restorative Approaches (RA), as an alternative to addressing the conflict in schools in a more humane way (Lloyd & McCluskey 2008, Kane, Lloyd, McCluskey, Riddell, Stead & Weedon, 2007), that is, to build more inclusive school communities, where different kinds of achievement are valued and staff and students work together to build an ethos of mutual respect. According to McCluskey and Lephhalala (2010:18) 'In a Restorative school, misconduct is viewed not simply as rule breaking and a violation of the institution of school, but primarily as a violation of people and the relationships in the school and wider community'. Thus both concepts, RA and ubuntu, challenge the use of punitive measures as a means of resolving conflict in schools and offer an alternative that seeks to build and enhance relationships: 'I am because we are; we are because I am'.

The aim of this paper is to determine the extent to which the notion of ubuntu can challenge and address the current wave of violence and conflict in schools. It seeks to respond to the following questions: In what ways can South African schools conceptualise the past, as espoused in ubuntu a traditional value system, in order to actively stem the current tide of violence and conflict in schools? In what ways can South African schools integrate the principles of ubuntu proactively to bring about harmony in schools? Can both ubuntu and RA principles be applied to address issues of violence in schools such that the basic human dignity of all involved in a conflict situation is not violated but protected?

This paper responds to these questions by first examining the concept ubuntu, a traditional cultural value system, which in many ways can be viewed as a past that could offer possibilities for addressing the present and moving on to a hopeful future. The discussion interweaves my personal experiences of growing up and living in a South African township, that is, residential areas that were reserved exclusively for blacks in the Apartheid era and which have largely remained the same 15 years after the new democratic government was established, and my interaction with schools in these areas. The paper, further, examines the possibilities and challenges of employing ubuntu principles, which

can offer humane guidelines for addressing the current violence and conflict, which tend to characterise schools. Finally the question, can ubuntu be labeled RA or are the two complementary but different concepts, is addressed.

### **What is Ubuntu?**

The concept, ubuntu, has over the years been used in a general sense to refer to an African philosophy of life (Mokgoro, 1997). It originates from the African idioms, 'Motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe' and 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' which loosely translated mean 'A person is a person through other persons', or, 'I am because we are; we are because I am'.(Goduka, 2000; Ramose, 1999).

Research reveals that although the concept originates in pre-colonial African rural settings and is linked with indigenous ways of knowing and being (Swanson, 2007), it is not easily definable because it tends to be thought of in diverse forms depending on the social context (Mokgoro, 1997; Anderson, 2003). As a result various definitions and descriptions of ubuntu abound, these include:

- 'an African philosophy of humanity and community' (Skelton 2002);
- 'an African cultural world-view' (Murithi, 2006, 2009);
- 'A philosophy of becoming human (Swanson 2008)'.

These definitions and descriptions depict the complex, elusive and multifaceted nature of the concept, ubuntu, which in turn mirrors the multiple and shifting insights into African society and human relationships. Thus, confirming Mokgoro's (1997:3) argument that 'its social value will always depend on the approach and the purpose for which it is depended on '. It is clear that, while on one hand there seems to be a common understanding of ubuntu and what it stands for as a value system; on the hand, it can mutate and offer different meanings depending on the social context.

However, despite these complexities, it is commonly understood that at the core of ubuntu principles is the recognition of a value system that acknowledges people as social and co-dependent beings. This is an ideal which expresses the need for a basic respect and compassion for others (Louw: 2003), promotes

'communalism and interdependence' (Mapadimeng 2007, 258) and confirms that 'all human beings are connected not only by ties of kinship but also by the bond of reciprocity rooted in the interweaving and interdependence of all humanity' (Goduka, 2000: 70). Ubuntu espouses values that tend to be associated with societal wellbeing, including: consensus, agreement and reconciliation, compassion, human dignity, forgiveness, transcendence and healing (Tutu, 1995; Mokgoro, 1999). Thus, it was expected that with the advent of the post-apartheid era in South Africa, ubuntu, as the only lived and commonly understood value system, should be extended to incorporate notions of nation building, transformation, reconstruction and transition into a democracy (Mbigi 1995, Skelton 2002; Swanson 2007),.

Ubuntu principles underlie conceptions of the various sectors of the new democracy in South Africa and have played a major role in influencing the restructuring of various policies on governance in the government, public and economic sectors. Some of the government and the judiciary policies informed by ubuntu values include:

- the Child Justice Bill of 2008 on juvenile justice reform which advocates the rehabilitation of children who violate the law and their reintegration into society on ubuntu principles (Skelton, 2002);
- the abolition of the death penalty was adopted by the constitutional court as an ubuntu principle in 1995 (Anderson, 2003); and
- the TRC, under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, incorporated the values of peacemaking as espoused in ubuntu as part of a national drive to bring about a form of socio-political reconciliation in a society divided along racial lines (Mapadimeng, 2007; Ramose, 1999; Murithi, 2006).

It is clear that the South African government espouses ubuntu not only as a once off conflict resolution mechanism, but, more importantly, it looks to ubuntu as a culture, that is, a way of life in the new democracy.

Ubuntu exemplifies how individuals, families, communities and societies should co-exist. Examples of such practices abound in many South African communities. For instance in townships it is commonly accepted that neighbors should cooperate and support each other in various ways. The word 'neighbor' in North Sotho, one of the indigenous South African language, is 'moagisane'. This word, has a deeply ingrained meaning that demands that families, neighbors and communities should work together, cooperate and support each other as a unit. It is common practice to expect a neighbor to ask for simple things such as salt, a cup of sugar, an onion or two potatoes. Neighbors understand the silent and unwritten code that 'I am able to support and help you today and that tomorrow or next week I might need your assistance and I know you will do the same for me'. This practice is also extended to various occasions such as weddings and funerals, where the silent and unwritten code is applied; without any formal invitation, neighbors can turn up at a wedding or funeral to assist the family with preparations and the cleaning up afterwards. Growing up as a black female one of the more powerful practices I have come to admire and now also practice myself is instances where women group themselves, in what is referred to as 'societies', which provide a support for them in various ways, including financial and emotional support. Considering the harsh nature of the discriminatory, Apartheid laws, for instance, 'societies' offered a means for township women to provide for their children's education because they knew that they could rely on the support of other women in the community to assist them with school or university fees. However, I have to concede that these practices seem to be losing ground and in some instances are being frowned upon for various reasons. But, what is noteworthy is that pockets of these practices still exist and it seems the interest in such practices is being revived as communities realize the importance of ubuntu: 'I am because we are; we are because I am'. Of interest is that the younger generation of women and men are also becoming involved with this practice in particular, because they have come to realize the importance of co-existence in a community as a way of life that sustained their mothers and families.

## **UBUNTU AND THE SCHOOL SYSTEM**

While ubuntu espouses those values that aim at bringing about harmony and promoting the collective wellbeing of society, the concept should not be advocated uncritically as Swanson (2007:59) cautions. Of concern is that ubuntu tends to entrench some of the existing and unchallenged discriminatory practices that are based on age, gender and social standing (Mduli, 1987), that is, practices which the younger generation tends to find problematic and would seek to challenge. For instance, the value of respect is sometimes abused to justify superiority based on age differences, gender and social positions (ibid.,1987) thus entrenching the existing societal power imbalances between men and women, adults and children, as well as rich and poor. Similarly, one of the main criticisms raised against the TRC, for instance, is that it bowed to pressure from legislative concerns and time constraints at the expense of the concerns and fears raised by individual women, in particular (Chapman, 2007).

These are genuine concerns, which have serious implications on the younger generation and the school system, in particular. The principles espoused in ubuntu, a traditional value system, might be problematic when applied in school settings because, as Nzimande (1988) warns, youth tend to view culture-based values as adult business and as such old-fashioned and not applicable to them. Therefore there is a need to re-examine and apply ubuntu principles more critically as an alternative approach to conflict resolution in schools to avoid entrenching some of the negative traditional adult –child relations that tend to dis-empower youth. Such an examination will entail empowering learners as human beings and acknowledging them as significant and valuable members of society by drawing in and incorporating their views through negotiations.

Another key criticism of ubuntu, which has implications for schools and learners, is that with its emphasis on values where ‘the collective supersedes the individual’ (Khoza, 2006) and which view ‘the community and not the individual at the centre’ (Goduka, 2000), ubuntu as a value system tends to enforce conformity (Marx 2002). The contention is that by enforcing conformity, existing imbalances in power relations between the individual and the community, are in turn reinforced and perpetuated (Sono 1994, Mbigi & Maree, 1995, Marx

2002). In promoting societal wellbeing uncritically, ubuntu enforces group solidarity at the expense of individual wellbeing. The danger with forced conformity is that it can create an environment of repressive conformity and compulsory loyalty thus discouraging any questioning of authority and /or resistance of domination (Mduli, 1987, 67-69). Of concern as Louw (2003) and Sono (1994) point out, is that very often noncompliance is met with harsh punitive measures resulting in the individual being marginalized and/or disempowered as a being. In an ubuntu school these issues are not ignored but are often challenged because they are disruptive and bring about disharmony. Every stakeholder in the school, in particular, learners should be aware and assured that they can bring these critical issues to the fore where they can be addressed.

The criticisms noted earlier can be challenged, and actually have been challenged, and I am certain that if the situation persists those issues will continue to be challenged because they go against all aspects of humanity espoused in ubuntu. More importantly, they contradict current government policies, which are centered on human rights values. Although the values of ubuntu could be exploited to justify and entrench unjust practices as noted earlier, they can, however, offer useful guidelines on what not to do, which could also offer insights, opportunities and possibilities of empowering the younger generation to engage in enhancing relations in schools. For example, policies that abolish corporal punishment in schools and the institution of the Child Justice Bill are but one of the many examples that reflect ubuntu principles and are viewed as concrete actions aimed at protecting youth, more specifically, learners in schools. Based on the expressions, "A person is a person through others" and "I am because we are; we are because I am", ubuntu acknowledges the valuable input learners and schools can bring in enhancing societal harmony, that is, 'both the rights and responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and social wellbeing' (Louw, 2005:9)

As Bruner (1996) argues societal contexts, which includes family norms values and culture, are highly influential and impact on young people's thinking and behavior in critical ways. The values of ubuntu, like those of any other culture,

are not inborn but are acquired in society and transmitted from one generation to another by means of language (Kamwangamalu, 1999). The challenge for schools, therefore, is to find the appropriate medium with which to strengthen and embrace ubuntu principles and relate them to their own specific contexts as well as community values. Schools could start by adopting ubuntu as a way of life, that is, as a community where everyone is affirmed and supported to be the best they can be.

Thus, as an existing and tested cultural approach to conflict resolution ubuntu can offer useful insights to alternative ways for more humane understandings of discipline, resolving violations and conflict as well as building an ethos of 'a person is a person because of others' in schools. As Murithi (2006) affirms 'As a traditional conflict resolution method and custom, ubuntu, is part of a time-proven social system, in which the objective is more than just settling a case – but is oriented towards reconciliation and maintenance or even improvement of social relationships'. Aimed at maintaining and improving social relations and enhancing practice Ubuntu, as embodied by the former President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, is part of traditional practices that have stood the test of time and as such can offer valuable lessons to youth and school communities.

### **Ubuntu as RA**

Ubuntu and RA share a number of qualities which emphasise the importance of humanity and societal well being. Ubuntu, as Murithi (2006) argues, gives insights into how the principles of empathy, sharing and cooperation can be utilized in efforts to resolve day-to-day issues that tend to impact negatively on human relations. Both ubuntu and RA advocate the use of co-operative efforts to address the imbalances created by an individual's conduct and aim at bringing about agreement and harmony (Anderson, 2003). The stages Murithi (2006) identifies as a ubuntu processes for bringing about a balance where harm has been done, that is, 'acknowledging guilt, showing remorse and repenting, asking for and giving forgiveness, and where required paying compensation or reparations as a prelude to reconciliation', are consistent with the some of the principles of RA. Similarly, ubuntu values, noted earlier, which include



consensus, agreement and reconciliation; embody the principles of RA (Anderson, 2003; Murithi 2009).

Developing research and practice on RA (McClusky and Lephhalala, 2010; Lloyd & McCluskey 2008) confirm similarities between RA and ubuntu. Suggesting that both principles, that is, RA and ubuntu, offer possibilities for school communities to start building a culture of mutual respect and allow staff and students to come up with their own unique ways of bringing harmony in the school (McClusky and Lephhalala, 2010). Ubuntu, like, RA is inspired by the philosophy and practices of restorative justice, which puts repairing harm done to relationships and people over and above the need for assigning blame and dispensing punishment. Both include values that are aimed at creating an ethos of respect, inclusion, accountability and taking responsibility, commitment to relationships, impartiality, being non-judgemental, collaboration, empowerment and emotional articulacy (ibid, 2010). Some of the key and valuable skills that should be applicable and useful in school settings include active listening, facilitating dialogue and problem-solving, listening to and expressing emotion and empowering learners to take ownership of problems.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has shown how South Africans both at government and community level have embraced the concept of ubuntu, an indigenous value system, as a useful compass for transcending the apartheid legacy and as a guiding principle for acknowledging that 'A person is a person because of others'. One has to acknowledge that this is not an instant and fix-it-all solution to the diverse challenges South Africans face but that it could be one of the processes that offers hope and opens up alternatives. In the same way the ubuntu principles can offer practical guidelines to school communities in addressing the current tide of student conflict and violence. But as Nzimande (1998) and Khoza (2006) caution, as a traditional value system, which can sometimes be used to discriminate individuals according to age, gender and class, ubuntu should not be applied uncritically in schools. It is of vital importance that issues of context, age, gender and class are addressed with sensitivity from the onset. Both ubuntu and RA can

offer effective conflict resolution possibilities in schools because they are based on similar principles that aim to bring about consensus, agreement and reconciliation. More importantly, since both ubuntu and RA acknowledge the complexities and importance of resolving conflict, these concepts can offer useful insights into the more subtle and extensive meanings of discipline that are unique to individual school communities and thus challenge the use of corporal punishment and other punitive measures as the main and sometimes only alternatives.

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