

## Being and becoming: negotiations on educational identity in (South) Africa

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The question on educational identity was, and still is, a paramount question in the South African educational context. An analysis of some of the important issues, as it pertains to the current discourse inside and outside the education sphere, suggests that there is a fundamental need to (re-)define our understanding and conceptualisation of educational identity. The search for new symbols and symbolic meaning, debates about the significance of africanisation, afrocentric identity, and indigenisation of education represent some of the markers in the education debate. A shared notion of educational identity can be ensured if certain conditions, such as a balanced approach to indigenisation, can be adequately met.

### Introduction and problem statement

The first democratic elections in South Africa in April 1994 symbolized the end of the decolonisation process in Africa. As a result of this historical event, South Africa found itself at the threshold of the global village. In order for it to enter the wider world, its political and social structures had to be transformed, and its relationships with the rest of Africa (and the rest of the world) redefined.

This transformational process has caused the following question to be asked in the South African intellectual debate since 1994: Is there such a thing as a specific, unique (South) African educational identity? (*cf.* Coetzee, 1999; Goduka, 1999; Luggya, 1999; Makgoba, 1998; Mbeki, 1998; Seepe, 1998).

There have been those who tended to answer in the affirmative. They are proponents and supporters of the notion of a characteristic and unique (South) African educational identity, and maintain that it is in fact in the process of developing and acquiring a clearer profile (*cf.* Mamdani, 1998:10-17; Fhulu, 1999:17; Yeboah, 1999:93; Luggya, 1999:204; Fante, 1999:219). In their opinion, the development of such a (South) African educational identity requires the restoration of the idea of African identity, an idea that tended to disappear into oblivion during the colonial period. It also requires reviving the African capacity for self-development, and the restoration of pride in African achievement. In some ways, it requires a degree of reversion to the pre-colonial past as well as a recrudescence and efflorescence of the culture of those times. It also requires a transformation of reality in ways that can create space for African self-development while simultaneously plotting a course towards global competitiveness. The mobilization of forces and elements that are committed to the arrival of an 'African Renaissance', and the creation of a new awareness and consciousness that places Africa in the centre of attention, are further steps that could (should) be taken.

Despite the optimism of these proponents of a unique (South) African (educational) identity, the notion of educational identity is beset with difficulties. For instance, a significant section of the (South) African society live and work in conditions that can be described as (post-)modern, whereas by far the larger section find themselves living and working in conditions that are largely (pre-)modern. Also, the fact that the (South) African community consists of not only Black (indigenous) Africans, but also people of European and Asian descent, as well as other people of colour (partially indigenous) seems to make the notion of 'a completely shared (South) African educational identity somewhat problematic. To what extent can all these africans share one and the same notion of (South) African (educational) identity? What will be the historical roots of the proposed shared (educational) identity?

The purpose of this article is to argue that it is indeed possible to conceptualize the notion of a shared (South) African educational identity, on condition that a thorough and extensive encounter takes place with education and the current educational discourse in the context of the diverse and multicultural educational realities of the (South) African society. In this encounter, questions such as the following need to be satisfactorily answered: What should be retained from traditional (pre-colonial) African culture? Which elements of African identity can be shared by all Africans, irrespective of religion,

creed, ethnicity, descent, language or race/colour? How does the notion of 'African Renaissance' connect with educational identity? How can the notions of africanisation, indigenisation and education be made relevant for all (South) Africans?

In order to substantiate the view that the formulation of a shared (South) African educational identity is indeed possible, the introduction of new symbols as a way towards formulating or conceptualizing a shared (new) (South African) educational identity will firstly be examined. This will be followed by an outline of the current educational discourse about what is required from education to unite the peoples of (South) Africa. The African Renaissance idea is then examined as another possible avenue towards formulating or conceptualizing educational identity. Finally, the discussion will focus on africanisation, indigenisation and education, in order to explore further possibilities of procuring a shared (educational) identity. The discussion will be concluded by putting forward some suggestions and guidelines regarding the negotiations about educational identity that will have to be conducted among all involved.

### The introduction of (new) symbols as a means towards formulating or conceptualizing a new educational identity

There is a movement afoot in South Africa (led by the national government) to establish a system of new national symbols. This is clearly being done to replace the symbols, that were characteristic of the political dispensation before 27 April 1994, with symbols reflecting a post-apartheid political system founded on the principles of unity, democracy and corrective action (National Educational Policy Investigation, 1992:6; Hoyle, 1986:151). The transformation of national symbols coincides with the discourse that is currently taking place, also in the context of education, with regard to national identity.

Deal (1991:419; 422), for instance, is convinced that symbols, and the symbolic activities stemming from them, serve to unite the values of society and can result in national unification. Sampson (1993: 22) goes further than this by saying that new symbols are a prerequisite for the creation of a new nation. In a recent study concerning the role of symbols in the creation of a positive school climate, Joubert (1996:67) concludes that the following master symbols are presently in the process of being developed on a national level in South Africa: the Bill of Human Rights (Chapter 2 of the Constitution, 1996), freedom and equality, the abolition of the death penalty, recognition of human dignity, religious freedom, children's rights, language, culture, and the necessity of basic education. Although this list of symbols is by no means exhaustive, it is nevertheless to a certain degree indicative of the fact that South Africans do indeed share a number of needs and values. This can contribute to the procurement of a shared national educational identity.

### The educational discourse about what should be required from education in order to bring about greater unity among (South) Africans

The current education debate in South Africa is marked by different approaches, perspectives, views and ideas about what should be put in, left out, transformed, and/or revitalised in order to procure a unique South African blend of education. The use of concepts like "(South)

Africanisation", "transformation", "Ubuntu", "African Humanism", "new consciousness" and "afrocentricity" are symptomatic of a growing need and urge to face the educational challenges of a new South Africa (*cf.* Mncwabe, 1990; McFarlane, 1995; Steyn, 1995; Sindane, 1994; Sebidi, 1995; Viljoen, 1996; Vorster, 1995; Enslin, 1993/94; Michell, 1994; Jansen, 1994; Mugo, 1999:225; Ntuli, 1999:188-189).

The discourse also deals with the educational conditions for bringing about greater unity among South Africans. Enslin (1994:34), for example, is convinced that reconciliation among the members of the South African nation is needed urgently, and that education has an important role to play in this regard.

Another condition that has been put forward is that western curricula, labels and methods should not be uncritically transplanted, since they can be seen as unfit for South African children (Naiker, 1995; Mittner, 1995:10-11; Madi, 1995:12-16; Muendane, 1995:56-57). Some educationists question the appropriateness of Curriculum 2005 precisely on these grounds (Mchunu, 1998; Hlophe, 1999; Moorosi-Molapo, 1998). They argue that the Outcomes Based Education system and other educational reconstruction experiments in South Africa have failed dismally to integrate African culture in the schooling system. The current educational policies, in the words of Fhulu (1999:17), "... have been coined along European lines, reflecting a culture of apemanship and parrotry any self-respecting African must distance himself/herself from". They also argue that, although on the surface the educational reconstruction discourse utilizes an emancipatory rhetoric, the primary aspect of the education renewal strategies are derived from western educational models. Under the guise of efforts to globalise education, educational prescriptions from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have been uncritically incorporated into the new education programmes. According to Fuhlu (1999:19), the outcomes of these actions include: the marginalisation of African culture, languages, customs and values, and the promotion of western or European culture at the expense of local African culture and language. All this can lead to feelings of alienation, rejection and lack of acceptance in school, as well as the feeling of being unable to cope (Du Toit, 1995:215).

For educational thinkers like Njoroge and Bennaars (1990:79), an obvious African philosophy of education is needed, one which could definitely be more relevant and meaningful to African students of education. Sifuna (1990:15) supports this by stating that education should be indigenised. The philosophy, methodology and schooling in Africa need to be reshaped and moulded to reflect some of the traditional ideas and perspectives. Luthuli (1982:36) echoes the same sentiment when he states that there is a burning need for a clear articulation of a philosophy that lies dormant in the hearts of the entire black community of South Africa.

It is clear from the above overview of the current educational debate that the search for what Mbigi and Maree (1994:31) call the collective national psyche, one in which both the western and the African educational ideas and practices will be fully organically synthesized, will indeed be a very difficult one. The total rejection of western influences by some of the educationists whose opinions have been reported above excludes, for instance, the loyalty and contributions of the white and the Asian communities in South Africa. A collective national psyche cannot be achieved in the face of such radical stances about what the nature of education should be. South Africa, and for that matter, the whole of Africa, will be isolated from the rest of the world if cognisance is not taken of educational developments and innovations from the west, and if those contributions that can add value to the (South) African national existence are not implemented in the school system. Radical and romantic approaches about reversion to pre-colonial African times will not only alienate those (South) Africans who cannot share this heritage because of their different descent, but will also isolate the continent and the country from the international discourse.

The search for educational identity in (South) Africa, therefore, requires from all participants in the discourse to seek consensus, to avoid radicalism and feelings of cultural and historical superiority. All the social, cultural, language, ethnic, racial and religious groups in (South) Africa should be allowed to contribute to the national and educational identity in order for it to be shared and upheld by all.

### **The African Renaissance movement as a way towards achieving shared (South) African educational identity**

The African Renaissance idea is a call for justice and equality in a world characterised by economic exploitation, political and racial oppression. It is also a call for the recognition of the unique qualities of African culture, achievements and contributions in the march of human civilisation in general (Mazrui, s.a.:1). It involves the re-assertion of a uniquely African identity and the revival of the African capacity for self-development which was severely undermined during the period of the Slave Trade and direct colonial rule. This is why, for some, the idea of a African Renaissance involves pride in one's own achievements, the glorification of the pre-colonial past (Wiredu, 1999:1), and an earnest attempt to glean the gems from the glorious past and adapt them to contemporary life in the course of South Africa's march towards global competitiveness.

The notion of an African Renaissance also entails the transformation of reality in ways which can create space for African self-development and self-help. This includes studying the current global system and the tendencies and dynamics of its development, and mobilizing those forces and elements to the advantage of Africa (Mazrui, s.a.:5).

The African Renaissance implies a second liberation struggle. It is, in essence, the restoration of the African genius which, in the past centuries, has created or contributed to world civilizations and cultures, and which endowed the world with an intellectual legacy in the fields of arts, sciences, philosophy, religious concepts and faith, modes of governance, engineering, law, social and moral norms, medicine and astronomy (Davidson, 1992; Hancock, 1995; Mazrui, 1990).

The African Renaissance is also an invitation to Africans to participate in the creation of a world civilization, the creation of a new world order. As a developmental movement, it shall have its base in the African continent — and anywhere else where Africans live in their diaspora. It shall be afrocentric in its focus, scope and operation. Its main objective, as a movement, shall be the creation of an awareness or a consciousness, or a concept of Africa as a centre and the starting point of reference, research and study in the afro-humanization of the African world and its resources (Mbeki, 1998:1).

The African Renaissance can therefore be understood as a resurrection, or restoration and adaptation to the current period of those ideas, ideals, concepts and value systems that have been left by the African ancestors as a legacy.

The degree to which the notion of an African Renaissance will be able to contribute to the attainment of a shared national educational identity will depend on the degree to which a balance is achieved. If, as in the case of some of the utterances about the African Renaissance above, the emphasis is too heavily on afrocentricity and on a reversion to the glory of pre-colonial Africa, then those who do not share this heritage will, as has already been argued above, not be able to share in the African Renaissance vision. If, on the other hand, the emphasis is too much on internationalism and global competitiveness to the detriment of the interests of Africa, others will feel excluded. Those politicians, leaders and educationists that propagate the African Renaissance vision should therefore be urged to take great care in their choice of words, and to strive for balance under all circumstances.

In principle, however, all (South) Africans can associate with the vision of an African Renaissance. Whether they will be able to continue supporting the idea and whether they will be able to contribute significantly to making it a reality, will depend on the terminology and the discourse in which it is couched.

### **Afrocentrism and the possibility of creating a (South) African educational identity**

According to Asante (as quoted in Hytten, 1997:1), afrocentricity is a philosophical theory (with a concomitant curriculum model) which aims at constructing a collective black consciousness that engenders political strength, meaningful identity, and the power necessary to positively transform the social and economic circumstances of both Africans and African-Americans.

Baker (1999:1) concurs: Afrocentricity is an empowering counter-hegemonic philosophy, which questions epistemological considerations which are based in European cultural realities. As an epistemo-

logical approach, the afrocentric discourse attempts to shift, construct, critique, and challenge knowing or discerning knowledge from an epistemology engendered within a European cultural construct to one that is engendered or centered within an African cultural construct.

In reacting to this formulation, Palermo (in Hytten, 1997:1) argues that while adopting an afrocentric worldview may lead to a new sense of empowerment and identity, this "empowerment" is both illusory and politically impotent. This is mainly because the afrocentric stance works predominantly on a psychological level to connect individual blacks to their ancestors, to their historical traditions, and to a larger sense of community. In a sense it may even further alienate Africans in given situations. He sees it as an acritical ideology that describes socioeconomic relationships in new ways (*cf.* Palermo, 1997:1; 10; 11).

Apart from the danger that afrocentrism will alienate (South) Africans of non-African descent, it may also alienate those of African descent who have since become fully westernized, as has been indicated by Palermo. Afrocentrism can, therefore, be quite detrimental to the ideal of a shared (South) African educational identity.

### **Africanisation (indigenisation), and the possibility of procuring a unique shared (South) African educational identity**

According to Seepe (1998:64) africanisation is the view that the African experience in its totality is simultaneously the foundation and source of the construction of all forms of knowledge. On this basis, it maintains that the African experience is by definition non-transferable but nonetheless communicable. Accordingly, it is the African who is and must be the primary and principal communicator of the African experience. To try to replace the African in this position and role is to adhere to the untenable epistemological view that experience is by definition transferable.

Africanisation holds that different foundations exist for the construction of different pyramids of knowledge. It disclaims the view that any pyramid is by its very nature eminently superior to all the others. It also entails a serious quest for a radical and veritable change of paradigm so that the African may enter into genuine and critical dialogical encounter with other pyramids of knowledge. Africanisation is a conscious and deliberate assertion of nothing more or less than the right to be African.

According to Makgoba (1998:49-51) africanisation is seen as the process or vehicle for defining, interpreting, promoting, and transmitting African thought, philosophy, identity and culture. It encompasses an African mind-set, or a mind-set shift from the European to an African paradigm. Through africanisation, identities can be affirmed in the world community. Africanisation involves incorporating, adapting, integrating other cultures into and through African visions and interpretations to provide the dynamism, evolution and adaptation that is so essential for survival and success of peoples of African origin in the global village. Since it is inclusive, africanisation is non-racial.

Vorster (1995) made an in-depth analysis of the concept "africanisation", and concluded that it primarily concerned Africans, or blacks of African descent, and Europeans, or whites of European descent in Africa, or in relation to Africa. What is more significant, though, was his conclusion that africanisation was in the first place an appeal to Africans to uphold the African cultural tradition and, secondarily, an appeal to Europeans in Africa to respect and accommodate endeavours to that effect. He found (Vorster, 1995:8-9) that:

- africanisation implied that Europeans should take cognisance of the African reality;
- should contrive to understand Africa's history and civilisation;
- realise that the Africans are alive and have developed a democratic attitude of mind;
- that Africans have involved themselves in an African epistemology of a phenomenological-humanistic nature;
- that Africa can make its own statement in a theoretically verifiable manner;
- that Africans can rationally defend their own point of view;
- that Africans have not lost their identity, an identity which is more a group-identity than a self-identity;
- that they have their own values and traditions;

- that Africans will not be controlled by European norms;
- that they want to be themselves alongside Europeans as equals, and that they strive towards the harmonious co-existence of an endless variety of cultures. (Also *cf.* Wiredu, 1984; Mafeje, 1992; Outlaw, 1998; Omoregbe, 1998, Rauche, 1996; Van Staden, 1996; Wilkinson, 1996; Seepe, 1998; Makgoba, 1998; Vilakazi, 1998; 1999; Goduka, 1999 for a more detailed discussion of africanisation.)

In summary then, africanisation means that all Africans can regard Africa as a basis from which to escalate their efforts and aspire to greater heights. They can take pride in being African or of African descent, appreciate and cherish the (ir) African cultural heritage, assert their own ideas, rights, interests and ideals, acquire a healthy self-concept, and hold their own intellectually in an intercultural context.

Regarding the evaluative remarks on the different avenues towards achieving a shared (South) African educational identity, which have been made in the various sections above, only a brief evaluative statement needs to be made here. Africanisation will be able to contribute to the achievement of a shared (South) African educational identity if it is not narrowly interpreted, in other words, to the exclusion of those (South) Africans not of African descent. An inclusive view of africanisation, as outlined above, will be able to make a significant contribution to rallying all (South) Africans to the purpose of formulating the vision of a common educational identity.

### **Concluding remarks**

This article investigated a few possibilities for acquiring a shared (South) African educational identity in an attempt to show that certain conditions have to be met for such a shared vision to materialise. It was found that there is a growing need to indigenise education in order to develop educational responses that would more appropriately fit the specificities of educational conditions prevailing within the diversity of the South African context.

It was also shown that the quest for symbols and symbolic meaning, the nature of the educational discourse, the realisation of the vision of an African Renaissance, afrocentricity, africanisation and indigenisation should all adhere to the principle of balance. Over-emphasis of, for instance, the African past will alienate certain (South) Africans, and in doing so will not lead to a shared educational identity. There is indeed a need for a combination of the best that Africa and the western world can offer our children. Twenty-first century (South) Africans belong, whether they like it or not, to two worlds — western and African. The degree to which a shared educational identity will be acquired will depend on how Africans position themselves and synthesise the disparate world views they have inherited. There is, therefore, also a need for South Africans to realise that the diversity of the people, and of their being in and of Africa, is not a liability but indeed a strength on which to capitalize.

Establishing a (South) African educational identity depends on finding the delicate balance between diversity and communality in schools and curricula. If the balance is disturbed in favour of commonality, cultural diversity becomes overlooked, and in the end perhaps even destroyed. If, on the other hand, the balance is disturbed in favour of diversity, the intercultural interaction that open pluralism demands is endangered. In both cases, education cannot contribute to open pluralism, but becomes a threat to its survival instead. In order to achieve this balance, the solidarity principle, which is central to the indigenous African way of thinking could be accommodated. It might help to create a national coherence and relatedness as well as space for diversity. Acceptance of the indigenous Ubuntu idea, on the other hand, can result in a re-definition of educational relationships: the current educational relationships, characterized by racial conflict, mistrust, bitterness, exploitation, alienation, polarization, stereotyping, can, in doing so, be transformed and replaced by a spirit of trust, independence, negotiation, friendship, collective learning, and societal bonding. A new national educational identity (characterised by unity in diversity — Goduka & Swadener, 1999) can become a reality through reconciliation, reconstruction, and revisioning.

Educational practices in (South) Africa will have to be informed by a collective and all-inclusive 'African' cultural experience. This will require a re-conceptualisation and re-design of education in (South) Africa from something that is unmistakably western to something that

reflects the ideals and experiences of the whole (South) African society.

The complexities of the various South African ethnic identities — each with its own value system, customs, lifestyles, histories, myths, symbols, customary laws, gender roles and rights, and language as the total constitution of a culture — should be analysed in terms of their implications for education, as well as for their potential contributions to education for all. Multicultural education can play a vital role in creating the necessary educational space for such interaction. This interaction could lead to a fully self-reflexively contextualised South African educational philosophy, in and through which the challenges are faced on a conceptual, hermeneutical, and ethical level.

The possibility of the indigenisation of education is a major issue about which (South) African educators will have to take decisions in due course. In making choices they will have to deal with the reality that sections of the (South) African society find themselves in — pre-modern, modern, and post-modern forms of existence, respectively. Wise decision-making can, however, lead to the construction of a quite unique (South) African society.

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