Transforming education in South Africa: paradigm shift or change?

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ABSTRACT
The transformation of the content of the educational curriculum in South Africa is an imperative of historical justice. Though the final constitution of South Africa represents a substantive improvement on the rights condition of many South Africans, it is at the same time an impediment to transformation. This is because it is not vested with credentials that make it a truly homegrown South African constitution. At the same time bounded reasoning in its aspect of impermeable boundaries renders the quest for transformation impossible. It is therefore urged that dialogue from within the permeable boundaries of all those involved is the optimal way to pursue the transformation of the content of the educational curriculum.

INTRODUCTION
It would appear that there is widespread agreement that the transformation of education in South Africa is either desirable or necessary. The reasons for this agreement are not the same. This is partly because the meanings of both transformation and education continue to be in dispute. Here it is proposed to focus primarily upon one aspect of the dispute, namely, whether or not the desirable or necessary transformation is a matter of paradigm shift or paradigm change. The thesis to be defended in this connection is that the transformation of education in South Africa is a matter of necessity and that the concrete manifestation of such transformation must be a change rather than a shift of the educational paradigm. This thesis is based on the observation that to date that which purports to be transformation of education represents a shift rather than a change of paradigm. In other words, the dominant paradigm in the sphere of formal education in South Africa continues to be that imposed upon the indigenous conquered peoples by the colonizer in the course of the unjust wars of colonization. That there is no justification for this continued dominance is precisely the ground for the thesis that a change of the educational paradigm in South Africa is a necessity that speaks to the exigencies of natural and historical justice.

Our reference to historical justice might jerk our critic to remind us that harping upon the past is unhelpful. It is better, so our well known critic avers, to concentrate upon the present and make it better with a view to creating a better future for all. No doubt there is some merit in this albeit somewhat dubious. First it is indeed prudent to warn against blaming the past for everything. However, it is wise to discern the causal and logical links between the past and the present. It is reasonable to argue that it is impossible to eradicate the natural biological link between parent and child but it is possible to deny any other link between them. Second it is rather odd that while our critic insists that we should forget about the past he or she does not, by parity of reasoning, urge for the abolition of archeology, psychology, psychiatry and history. Nor does our critic urge for the invention of a new calendar comprising of fourteen months and in which Easter and Christmas are completely excluded. The point we are making here is that neither the present nor the future can be created out of nothing. History is the repository of memory necessary for the construction of an ever changing present and the projection of a better future.

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THE CASE FOR A PARADIGM CHANGE

Victorious over the indigenous conquered peoples of South Africa in the unjust wars of colonization, the conqueror proceeded to claim the so called right of conquest. (Ramose 2002:470) By virtue of this questionable right the conqueror imposed unilaterally upon the conquered the meaning of experience, knowledge and truth. This was the inauguration of epistemicide in South Africa; the killing of the epistemology of the indigenous peoples. The latter’s experience, the manner in which it was constructed into knowledge and truth was replaced by the epistemological paradigm of the conqueror. Since April 27 1994 the successors in title to the colonial conqueror had to acknowledge that the much acclaimed miracle of the Resurrection was paralleled by the miracle of the indigenous conquered peoples reclaiming their right to define experience, knowledge and truth in their own terms. And this was the birth of the struggle for the change of the educational paradigm in South Africa. The time had come for the epistemological paradigm of the conqueror to account for its undeserved dominance over all the other existing epistemologies in South Africa. We now turn to consider this.

RUMOURS OF TRANSFORMATION

The purpose of the above sub title is to invite an investigation into the truthfulness and the credibility of the claim that post April 27 1994 South Africa is an open ended period of transformation. The first part of our investigation will focus on the meaning of the so called negotiations leading to this period. The second part will be that the conclusion arising from this investigation will serve as the context within which to situate and, eventually, to evaluate transformation in the sphere of education.

The setting of the Kempton Park talks involved two main parties, namely, the successors in title to the questionable right of conquest and the indigenous conquered peoples of South Africa. Two contending, though not by necessity mutually exclusive paradigms, vied for first and only attention in the talks. These were the decolonisation and the democratization paradigms. (Rantete 1998:xv xix) The latter won the day. The talks were also to focus upon the interim constitution as the basis for the making of the final constitution. It is crucial to note that the interim constitution (Act No 200 of 1993) contained the term ubuntu. This is particularly significant because ubuntu is in the first place a philosophy second to none in our planet earth. (Ramose 1999a:49 66) Second, a rather large segment of the South African population continues to adhere to and practise ubuntu philosophy. Third, the numerical power of this segment of the population is certainly crucial for the politics of adversarial majoritarian democracy. Fourth, it is widely acknowledged that law and, especially the constitution, is the legal expression of the moral convictions and the cultural values of those it is intended to govern. It is rather odd, therefore, to discover that the term ubuntu is totally absent from the final constitution. We propose the following explanation for this oddity.

The final constitution is juridically and philosophically different from the 1961 (Act No 32 of 1961) and 1983 (Act No 110 of 1983) constitutions respectivly. The principal difference lies in the fact that the final constitution (Act No 108 of 1996) is the abandonment of the principle of parliamentary supremacy and the option for constitutional supremacy. The essence of the latter is that the constitution is held to be the basic and supreme law and parliament is bound to enact only legislation which complies with and is consistent with the constitution. In other words, the powers of parliament are subordinate to and must be exercised only in the service of the constitution. Parliament then had to assume, as it were, the status of prisoner of the constitution. In effect the principle of popular sovereignty, which is the reason for a representative parliament, was set aside. It is significant that the option for constitutional supremacy was resisted for a long time by the successors in title to the “right of conquest” even though the call for this option came from within its ranks (Davenport 1960:13). The question then arises: what is it that awakened these successors in title to the virtues of constitutional supremacy precisely at the time when the extension of the right to vote on the basis of a common voters’ roll was imminent? One answer to this question is that the successors in title to the “right of conquest” feared that their numerical minority position could work out to their disadvantage once majority rule was accepted on the basis of parliamentary supremacy. If this is an obvious answer, it certainly raises the question why did the option of these successors in title succeed?

A lot of ink has already flown in connection with the exclusion of ubuntu from the final constitution (De Kock 1999:114 120, Van Niekerk 1998:167 171). Most of the arguments pertaining to this point focus upon the nature and character of legal dogmatics and juridical interpretation (Kroeze 2001:267 69). The core of the argument is that legal principles and norms are encased within virtually inviolable boundaries. They seldom permit the opening of boundaries to alien concepts like ubuntu. Instead, legal dogmatics demands that juridical interpretation must proceed on the basis of the encased principles and norms (Milovanovic 1992:114). This argument is fairly plausible. However, its strong focus upon the linguistic semiotic aspects of law tends to over shadow an equally crucial aspect, namely, the nature and character of power relations in the construction of law. Taking our cue from this latter perspective, our argument is that prior to the adoption of the final
constitution, the successors in title to the “right of conquest” have deployed *ubuntu* skillfully and systematically in order to achieve their own ends. A few examples will suffice. In the interim constitution *ubuntu* was invoked to justify the necessity for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In the light of the decision of the Constitutional Court with regard to the case (CCT 17/96) presented by the Azanian Peoples Organisation, it is apparent that the major beneficiary of the TRC is the successor in title. However, it is worth noting that though the latter has gained political and economic benefits, it does not necessarily follow that there are psychological gains as well. *Ubuntu* was again invoked by the Constitutional Court delivering the judgment that capital punishment is unconstitutional (1995 (3) SA 391 (CC)). With respect, the invocation of *ubuntu* was just an aside as the same conclusion could have been reached without recourse to it. These examples show that the successors in title to the “right of conquest” have used *ubuntu* skillfully and systematically to achieve their own ends. This could hardly have been possible if these successors did not have mastery, command and control over the epistemological paradigm instituted in South Africa since the defeat of the indigenous conquered peoples. This is also the reason why these successors have succeeded to have *ubuntu* excised from the final constitution. They no longer needed it. Its inclusion would simply have been an aberration distorting their epistemological paradigm. The point then about the exclusion of *ubuntu* from the final constitution is to underline the double defeat of the indigenous conquered peoples. The first defeat was that marked by the unjustified use of violence at colonization. Epistemicide was one feature of this defeat. The second defeat was at the so called negotiations that paved the way for the post April 27 1994 South Africa. This defeat is represented by the killing of *ubuntu*, its exclusion from the final constitution. The exclusion is, in effect, yet another instance of epistemicide.

The double defeat referred to above means that the double epistemicide means that none of the constitutions of South Africa can licitly claim to be the constitution of all the peoples of South Africa. The fact that alien Westminster and Roman Dutch law constitutional concepts have been translated into the vernacular languages of the indigenous conquered peoples is not equal to the embodiment, in the constitution, of their moral convictions and values contained in *ubuntu*. In this sense even the final constitution cannot claim to be vested with credentials as an integral homegrown South African constitution. Accordingly, to refer to the final constitution as “our” constitution is tenuous at best and, problematical at worst. In this respect it is like the constitution of Zimbabwe (Van Hoorn 1994:159) and many post colonial African countries. Nhema argues the same point with regard to the Lancaster constitution for Zimbabwe. “Denial of rights on grounds of race meant that a universal franchise did not exist in Rhodesia. Without either practice or experience how were the disenfranchised majority expected to grapple with constitutional arrangements that had their origins in England? ... An authentic democratic system is one in which there is a complementary relationship between democratic political institutions and social organizations. It is doubtful that the largely rural citizens of Zimbabwe identify closely with the political institutions which govern them, given the fact that they are largely unrelated to indigenous structures. By all accounts, it is apparent that the democratic framework adopted in 1980 had no roots in the society it was designed to serve” (Nhema 2002:35).

In the light of the foregoing, it is apparent that imprisonment by a constitution with dubious home grown credentials together with epistemicide define the context within which transformation is to occur in South Africa. But is this project credible since the fact of imprisonment speaks to the necessity to be freed from a constitution which has already prescribed and predetermined the rules and limits of transformation? Indeed proponents of the final constitution have no qualms in elevating it to the status of the god of the political kingdom, or, better still the political quendom. This they do by recourse to the “essential features” doctrine (Kesavananda v State of Kerala A.I.R 1973 SC 1461; Morgan 1981:307 337). This doctrine holds that “the constitution rests on legal principles which serve as preconditions for the very existence of the constitution itself, the abolition of which deprives the constitution of its validity as supreme law” (Wiechers 1989/90:20 21). Thus the final constitution of South Africa is imprinted with the character of essentiality and immutability. No doubt the proponents of the “essential features” doctrine appear to derive satisfaction from ignoring the question: where exactly do the putatively essential and immutable principles come from? In these circumstances, it would appear that the project of transformation is ended even before it is begun. The prospect of resurrection from epistemicide shall remain a permanent tantalizing illusion. At the same time talk about transformation must be understood for what it really is, namely, reformation within the rules and limits imposed by the constitution. Following upon this it should be clear that what we have then is only a paradigm shift. This is to say that we have a process of carefully controlled multiple movements designed to integrate previously excluded elements but without any alteration to the substance of the existing dominant epistemological paradigm. It is against this background that we now turn to consider the project of already arrested transformation in the sphere of education. Our reference to transformation must therefore be understood as the reference to reformation unless this is inconsistent with the context.
TRANSFORMATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL PARADIGM

We will not enter into a disquisition concerning the definition of education. Suffice it to state that we understand education to be a culture based and institutionalized process by which the individual acquires understanding, knowledge and techniques for individual as well as collective survival. On this definition there is a link between individual survival and the continual reshaping of culture and society. Individual survival speaks to the necessity to recognize, respect and protect each individual’s inalienable right to subsistence. From this point of view formal basic education, properly construed, is a right. This is recognized in section 29(1) of the final constitution of South Africa. It has been argued that subsections (a) and (b) of this section mean the “right to equal access to educational institutions dealing with basic education, with the concomitant prohibition of discrimination and also the possibility of affirmative action. Regarding further education, the equality principle seems to allow for policies aimed at giving preference to previously disadvantaged groups in the ‘progressive making available and accessible’” (Herrard 1996:166). This echoes the following observation made in an attempt to determine whether or not educational reform in sub-Saharan Africa is a myth or reality. “Any attempt to transform society by educational reform or expansion, must be preceded or at least accompanied, by far reaching social, economic and political reforms such as allocating more of the resources to the marginalized groups of the society who need these most” (Kapfunde 1999:38). Education then stands or falls in terms of the manner and extent to which it recognizes, respects and protects the inalienable individual right to subsistence. This is also the basis for the project of the transformation of the educational paradigm in post April 1994 South Africa.

It seems to us that the project of transformation must be predicated on the premise that:

“In the aftermath of colonization and the continued interaction, the Occidental paradigm has been involved in conflict with the African’s search for identity. However, in the discourses that emerge from the West, the search for identity is portrayed as a quixotic exercise pursued by men and women who yearn for their prelogical past. In actual fact, the quest of identity cannot be advanced without conflict with the Occidental paradigm” (Situma 2002:102).

Proceeding from this premise we now turn to consider the meaning of transformation.

According to Makgoba, “Transformation is an act or process whereby the form, shape or nature of some thing is completely changed or altered, a blueprint change. This definition is important to distinguish transformation from reformation. Reformation is the process of modification without fundamental change, a cosmetic change” (Makgoba 1997:181). We note that on this definition transformation involves the complete change of “form, shape or nature” of something. The last mentioned, “nature” is somewhat problematical. The problem arises on the basis of the following reasoning. It is uncertain if “nature” here refers to substance or essence notwithstanding the fact that there is a thin line of divide between the two concepts. For some it is plausible to argue that whereas the physical body is the substance of the human animal the essence of being a human being is to have a soul. Without the soul the physical substance of the human animal does not constitute the human being. Now both the substance and the essence of the human animal may claim to constitute the “nature” of the human being. Does a complete change of the substance into dust, for example, mean simultaneous change of the soul and, into what? On the strength of this reasoning, we would like to make the following points. One is that Makgoba’s definition of transformation renders the meaning of change rather tenuous. Once the physical body is turned into dust is it really changed or, has it vanished? Two is that he seems to hold that change and substitution are synonymous and this is not necessarily the case at all times. Three is that the “form” or “shape” of something might change without a change of substance at the same time. For example, there are various forms and shapes that can be constructed out of clay or glass. Fourth point pertains to Makgoba’s “a blueprint change”. This point is particularly important because further on at page 208 of the same text this definition is repeated almost verbatim and, this time round with “a blueprint change” printed in bold. Having considered various perspectives on the origin of things in the significant chapter, “Blueprint for a Universe”, Davies concludes that: “..., even if one accepts the need to complement reductionism with a holistic account of nature, many scientists would still reject the idea of a cosmic blueprint as too mystical, for it implies that the universe has a purpose and is the product of a metaphysical designer. Such beliefs have been taboo for a long time among scientists” (Davies 1987:8). On this basis we suggest that Makgoba’s use of “blueprint” is misleading. Furthermore, it is also somewhat deterministic and thus undermines human freedom even if philosophy might consider it to be a necessary illusion. In the light of these considerations we suggest that transformation in the sphere of human relations means the deliberate entry into dialogue with another in order to construct mutually agreed forms or shapes out of already existing material. Our next step is to determine if what has been termed transformation thus far speaks to our understanding of this concept. We recognize the curriculum as the terrain of the struggle for the transformation of the educational paradigm.

Greenstein makes the opposite observation that: “The current focus on the socio economic development of
the country should not allow us to ignore culture and identity as essential components of transformation. Without taking these into consideration the contribution of economic and technological development to the well being of people might be seriously hampered” (Greenstein 1997:128). After a careful analysis of various policy documents pertaining to curriculum change, Greenstein observes that most of them focus more on the structure rather than the content of the curriculum. The same author notes that: “While we cannot expect politicians to open the proverbial can of worms that will land them in trouble, academics might be expected to be more daring in dealing with controversial issues. Unfortunately there is little evidence of such initiatives. Many academic attempts to address questions of unity, diversity, identity and power offer interesting insights attuned to the international literature on these topics, but they ultimately replicate with minor variations the formulations offered in the policy documents discussed above” (Greenstein 1997:133 134). Considering that the “policy documents discussed above” focus more on form rather than content, it may well be surmised that the birth of a change of paradigm in education is yet to be witnessed. The examples below support this point.

The tendency is growing in the country for academics to migrate to administration. The attraction of this migration is so strong that it has now crystallized into the dogma that “once Vice Chancellor or Dean then Vice Chancellor or Dean forever”. This is echoed in the sphere of African politics though it must be noted that it appears to be changing. Acting according to this dogma has turned many an excellent academic into peripatetic Vice Chancellors. Though there may be many reasons for this migration, it would be dishonest to exclude better remuneration as one of them. This is a strange situation because it creates the false impression that the core business of any research and teaching institution, especially the university, is administration. Surely, this is a reversal of priorities since it is beyond dispute that the core business of any university is research and teaching. Accordingly, the core business should be valued comparatively higher than any other activity. Otherwise, urgent measures should be undertaken to strike a remunerative balance between the two activities, that is, research and teaching on the one hand and administration on the other. What particularly concerns us about this migration to administration is that it appears to be a vote of no confidence in the quest to transform the content of the curriculum. Connected to this is the university administration’s readiness to establish the well known learner support structures. The underlying reason for this is the admission that some learners enter the university ill prepared for learning in a university. The learner support structure offered by the university administration is only a partial answer to the problem. The root of the problem lies exactly in the preceding layers of schooling tasked with preparing the learner for tertiary education. Are the learners in the preceding layers tutored by those who are themselves ill equipped for the task? If the answer is in the affirmative why is it that academics in tertiary institutions appear disinclined to migrate to kindergarten and primary school teaching? This disinclination reveals that the education sector in South Africa is held captive by verticality which pays only lip service to quality teaching where it matters most, namely, in the initial stages of learning. This situation appears to be worsened by the fact that remuneration appears to be lowest where continued research and teaching are needed most. Thus in the entire education sector it is money, the absolute sovereign, which determines the pursuit of the transformation of the curriculum. In these circumstances, it is doubtful if the transformation of the content of the curriculum will ever be realized. Yet, the perspective of a democratized South Africa has very serious implications for education because it implies the critical reappraisal of those educational approaches which are part of the country’s colonial heritage, and the development of meaningful and relevant paradigms which will reflect the newly achieved road the country is taking. Thus, the educational process must allow for an experience of the historico cultural transformation of Africa as the basis for the understanding of the historico cultural transformation of the rest of the world. In other words, education in South Africa must make Africa the focal point from which all other cultures are studied, and must give just and unexaggerated recognition to the cultural contribution of Africa to world civilisation. (da Costa & Meerkotter 1992:86).

In pursuing this ideal of the transformation of the content of the curriculum, it is necessary to keep in mind that the above citation has long formed part of African thinking. It was stated in these terms “the quest for a reduction of foreigners does not lie in restricting ourselves to the study of only African phenomena. The greater challenge is to study a variety of other intellectual riches but from an African perspective” (Mazrui 1978:208). The problem though is to determine the content and meaning of African. The problem arises precisely because the term Africa as it is understood today cannot sustain the claim that it is an indigene of the geographic region known as Africa.

In the light of the foregoing it seems we are led ineluctably to the conclusion that a change of paradigm in the curriculum is yet to be realized. What are the prospects for bringing about such a realization?
BREAKING THE IMPASSE

The kind of thinking that characterizes most of what is stated in the preceding paragraphs may be described as fragmentative thinking. It is the kind of thinking which extracts pieces of experience from the wholeness of reality. The pieces are then held to be the only manifestation of the wholeness (Bohm 1980:30) of reality. The end result of this thought pattern of fragmentation is often to create irreconcilable opposites where there is no need for such (Bohm 1971:27-30). Another feature of fragmentative thinking is that it draws boundaries over reality as a wholeness. This is its method of creating order and establishing identities. We call this bounded reasoning. It may be exemplified by the assertion that god cannot be god without the boundary separating creator from creature.

To some extent bounded reasoning may be justified philosophically. It may be construed as the ontological necessity to contemporaneously include and exclude specific elements or qualities in order to define either oneself or others. Thus conceived, bounded reasoning involves the imposition of limitation upon substance and form. Without the erection of boundaries through this kind of imposition it seems and, it only seems impossible to define and identify oneself or others. Thus bounded reasoning is the representation in practice of the experience and culture of the individual subject. It is precisely as this kind of representation that bounded reasoning is the bearer of the values of the individual. The concept of individual or collective identity is rooted in the idea of bounded reasoning as the representation of individual or collective values. The affirmation of individual or collective identity may take one of the two forms. It may be totally exclusive protecting identity within completely closed and sealed boundaries. In this case we have an impermeable boundary.

Because they are total and completely sealed enclosures, impermeable boundaries do not allow for the possibility of change of identity resulting from external influences. The response of impermeable boundaries to the existential necessity to relate openly to the environing world tends to proceed from the position that its identity is the only most important one. Herein lies the problem with regard to the quest for transformation in general and, in particular the transformation of the content of the curriculum. For as long as the players in this situation remain protected within impermeable boundaries then there is no hope for a breakthrough. Instead, the impasse will persist. But the situation could be different if the affirmation of individual or collective identity could take another form, namely, become a permeable boundary.

Permeable boundaries are by definition open to the possibility for change of identity resulting from external influences. Their perforated character allows for the possibility of some kind of osmotic interaction that could over time result in the change of identity. This is so because permeable boundaries are inward and outward looking at the same time. Their openness speaks to the desideratum for interaction and dialogue and this is the reason why we used the term dialogue in our definition of transformation. It follows then that the quest for the transformation of the content of the curriculum can proceed and is likely to succeed if all those involved are prepared to enter into dialogue from within their permeable boundaries. In these circumstances, truth will no longer be under stood as absolute, eternal and immutable metaphysical ideas that await only to be discovered by some lucky few human beings. On the contrary, the quest for truth shall be predicated on the understanding that is the contemporaneous convergence of perception, reason and action (Bohm 1994:181). In this sense, truth is an ongoing human construction. Human beings are therefore not made by the truth. Instead, they are the makers of the truth.

CONCLUSION

We have shown that though the final constitution of South Africa is a substantive improvement on the rights condition of many South African, it is at the same time an impediment because it is not vested with credentials that make it a homegrown constitution. It is precisely this impediment that holds at ransom the quest for the transformation of the content of the educational curriculum. It is therefore urged that the constitution should release those it is holding at ransom. Once this is done then the pursuit of transformation should be by way of dialogue only from within the permeable boundaries of all those involved.

REFERENCES


