Growing human rights and values in education

Patrick O. Nyabul

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Nairobi, PO Box 30197, Nairobi, 00100, Kenya
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and articulates dilemmas inherent to attempts to strengthen national unity while simultaneously ensuring that human rights are respected. She cites a range of contradictory policies that need to be revisited and revised before we can say that democracy is enjoyed by all. She is forthright as she tackles such topics as gender inequality, practices of customary law and traditional leadership, in particular the later as it has a potential to encourage ethnic divisions.

Fifteen years into the South Africa democracy, a balanced, critical assessment of South Africa’s political, social and moral life is greatly welcomed. The book offers a penetrating critique along with hope-filled and practical solutions. The spiritual tone of Ramphele’s book, apparent in the idea of ‘ghosts’, is also evident in the use of the concept of ‘transcendence’. For the author, ‘transcendence’ is key in overcoming critical challenges and will assist in aligning the values of South Africans with the precepts of the constitution. The book calls upon all citizens to actively participate in making transformation possible and it gives the reader an opportunity to engage with a range of complex, provocative and controversial moral and political issues facing South Africa and many nascent democracies today.

This book is impressive because of the author’s ability to reveal the truth with passion while simultaneously providing a measured and balanced account of her key themes. I had moments of almost embarrassed recognition and identification as Ramphele delved into sensitive areas which, I later realised, were her stubborn ghosts and which I, as a black South African woman, have long hesitated to name.

Bongiwe Mncwango, senior researcher, Knowledge Systems, Human Sciences Research Council, Private Bag x 41, Pretoria 0001, South Africa. Email: bmncwango@hsrc.ac.za

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does this by placing special emphasis on the role of the school in cultivating lived human morality, using the renewed emphasis on values in South African schools as both a context and a case study.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I deals with both the philosophical and practical understanding of human rights and values and how these might best be achieved in an educational environment. This part comprises seven chapters which deal with: conceptualising values; living human rights; understanding education policy from a rights and values perspective; building value-driven schools; the impact of legal frameworks on schools; the importance of accountability; and managing values and human rights in schools. The authors maintain that human rights and values are inseparably intertwined. They argue correctly that ‘it is not enough to know and understand what values and human rights are. They must come alive in the hearts and minds of people... living a just life must come from within’ (p. vii). In so saying they reiterate Aristotle’s view that not only is knowledge of morality required, but also its practical application. The challenge to educationalists is how to create an environment in which this translation can best be achieved.

The authors make several important claims: first, that external coercion is ineffective in helping others to change their habits and attitudes in favour of respect for human rights—rights that cannot only be founded on legalism; second, that people deliberately choose their behaviour on the basis of their social, cultural, economic and political convictions, presuppositions and norms which inform their understanding and consequent practice of what they perceive to be moral; third, that morality is relative to time and place since these ethical concepts are dynamic in terms of their change of meanings, as one generation bequeaths a different definition of morality to the next; fourth, that ‘the classical child depravity theory’ (p. viii) is incorrect and that a simple ‘fix the kids approach’ (p. viii) is untenable and thoughtless. Instead, they propose that educational contexts provide the milieus within which children construct value systems that inform their behaviour. While these claims are contestable and controversial, they do begin an important debate in the South African context and contribute towards deepening dialogue concerning values and moral education in a country where both have been abused under the oppression of Apartheid.

In Part II, the authors offer concrete examples of how an appropriate climate might be created in the school context with regard to specific moral issues, namely, inclusive education, gender equity, HIV/AIDS and school violence (or ‘safe schools’). As proponents of inclusive education, the authors illustrate how human rights and values are critical to dealing with universal issues of social inclusion. They do not shy away from debating some contested suggestions about what might constitute justice for learners with special needs, especially in a society that has limited resources. The chapter on gender equity differentiates between key concepts, such as equality of opportunity and equality of results, and offers a synopsis of the issues at stake with regard to gender in education. Whilst this is not new it does summarise the key issues succinctly and is especially important in contexts in which masculine domination has been both politically and culturally supported. With regard to HIV/AIDS the authors...
focus on the human rights and values necessary to create a climate in which stigma and discrimination in the school context are addressed. They also propose ways in which sex education might be offered with dignity and with due regard for both power and poverty issues and concerns in the AIDS pandemic. Finally, they apply the principles of the South African constitution to issues of school safety, including rights-based discipline and ways in which to address violence (including bullying) and sexual coercion at school. They convincingly show how it is possible to create both a safe school and a moral school climate through appropriate leadership and engagement with learners.

Growing human rights and values may be criticised for a lack of new arguments and indeed there are issues which are missing. In particular, the omission of a chapter on race and economic inequality is puzzling given the South African context. However, the book serves as a useful introduction to the topic. Nieuwenhuis, Beckmann and Prinsloo clearly summarise the key arguments regarding the role of human rights and values within a school context; they do so in a context newly emerging from totalitarian oppression and conflict; and they offer concrete examples of how ongoing debates may be operationalised. In addition, Growing human rights and values in education is readable and well illustrated with engaging anecdotes and thoughtful educational dilemmas. It will be of interest to those teaching and researching in post-conflict contexts and for those new to the field.

Patrick O. Nyabul, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Nairobi, PO Box 30197, Nairobi, 00100, Kenya. Email: nyabul@yahoo.com

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