

Joorst, Jerome

Rethinking the complexity and tensions of culture and education beyond national frames. A culture responsive South African perspective

ZEP : Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik 48 (2025) 4, S. 31-33



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Joorst, Jerome: Rethinking the complexity and tensions of culture and education beyond national frames. A culture responsive South African perspective - In: *ZEP : Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik* 48 (2025) 4, S. 31-33 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-358249 - DOI: 10.25656/01:35824; 10.20377/zep-63

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-358249>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:35824>

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:

ZEP

Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung
und Entwicklungspädagogik

"Gesellschaft für interkulturelle Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik e.V."

<https://www.uni-bamberg.de/allgpaed/zep/profil>

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Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS

DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation

Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung

E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de

Internet: www.pedocs.de

Mitglied der


Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Jerome Joorst

Rethinking the Complexity and Tensions of Culture and Education Beyond National Frames: A Culture Responsive South African Perspective

Abstract

More than 30 years after the official end of apartheid and the return to democracy in South Africa, structural and cultural violence is still present. Educational policy aspirations and practical implementation are worlds apart. The consequences of racist historiography are currently combined with the disenfranchisement of education within the neoliberal straitjacket. This is the framework within which the cultural complexity in the education sector of Bagskol's partners is viewed in a critical yet friendly manner.

Keywords: *post-apartheid, democracy, neoliberalism, South Africa*

Zusammenfassung

Mehr als 30 Jahre nach dem offiziellen Ende der Apartheid und der Rückkehr zur Demokratie in Südafrika ist die strukturelle und kulturelle Gewalt nach wie vor präsent. Bildungspolitische Ansprüche und praktische Umsetzungen gehen weit auseinander. Die Konsequenzen rassistisch geprägter Geschichtsschreibung verbinden sich aktuell mit Entmündigungen von Bildung im neoliberalen Korsett. Dies ist der Rahmen, in dem die kulturelle Komplexität im Bildungsbereich der Bagskol-Partner kritisch-freundschaftlich betrachtet wird.

Schlüsselworte: *Post-Apartheid, Demokratie, Neoliberalismus, Südafrika*

Introduction

In a world marked by growing cultural diversity, political fragmentation, and renewed nationalism, education is increasingly tasked with managing complex questions of identity and belonging. Yet many educational responses remain confined within narrow national frames that privilege dominant cultural norms and linear historical narratives. South Africa, emerging from a history of racialised cultural exclusion, offers a contrasting, but imperfect educational vision grounded in plurality, redress, and relational belonging. This essay argues that South Africa's experiences with cultural negotiation, multilingualism, and ethical frameworks such as Ubuntu can provide useful insights for rethinking education beyond national

frames, enabling more humane and inclusive responses to cultural complexity.

The complexity of culture

Generally, culture is understood as a group's shared way of life, encompassing beliefs, values, and social practices. In South Africa, however, culture cannot be separated from a history shaped by apartheid and enforced separation. While the post-apartheid state has taken symbolic and legislative steps toward a democratic, non-racial, and inclusive national culture, these ideals remain compromised by persistent implementation challenges. Despite extensive education policy reforms aimed at democratisation and social cohesion, the education system continues to face a profound structural and existential crisis (Kumalo, 2020; Madlingozi, 2018). This crisis is exacerbated by the failure to adequately confront the enduring legacies of imperialism and the dominance of neoliberal ideology, with race, language, and culture still determining educational access and quality.

In post-apartheid South Africa, culture has become closely entangled with the neoliberal socioeconomic order underpinning globalisation (Mayaba, Ralarala & Angu, 2018; Price, 2014). In higher education, this "neoliberal culture" has shifted institutional priorities away from pedagogical and public-good values toward competitive, entrepreneurial models, deepening inequalities in access (Munyaradzi, 2024; Price, 2014). At school level, an exaggerated focus on measurable outcomes has narrowed education's broader social purpose (Christie, 2008), leaving teachers to navigate persistent gaps between policy intent and classroom realities. Thirty-one years into democracy, former black schools remain largely under-resourced, while historically privileged schools flourish, reinforcing cultural hierarchies tied to elite forms of capital.

South African Education Policy

South Africa's legal and policy framework strongly affirms cultural diversity. Section 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Government of South Africa, 1996) guarantees equality and prohibits unfair discrimination

while cultural competence is promoted (Moleya, 2018). The Constitution further safeguards language and cultural rights (Section 30) and the rights of cultural, religious, and linguistic communities (Section 31). In the education sector, White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) positions learner diversity as central to inclusive teaching and calls for systemic transformation to accommodate cultural, linguistic, religious, and socio-economic differences. Teacher preparation is guided by the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015), which requires teachers to understand diversity and address learning and social barriers collaboratively. Professional accountability is reinforced by the South African Council for Educators' Code of Professional Values and Ethics (SACE Act, 2000), which mandates respect for learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. At classroom level, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, national policy for all schools (Department of Basic Education, 2011), require teachers to plan for diversity through curriculum differentiation and responsive pedagogy.

Despite policy commitments to cultural diversity, a persistent policy-practice gap remains, with teachers often lacking the support needed to implement inclusive ideals in classrooms. Macro-level forces such as the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, neoliberal influence, and symbolic policy reforms undermine meaningful change. These intersect with micro-level realities of race, class, and language that continue to shape unequal access to quality education.

Conceptual underpinning of cultural responsive education and teaching

The essay draws on concepts that are anchored in broader theoretical traditions such as critical pedagogy, African philosophy, and social justice education. Fraser's 2016 conceptual framework of justice includes the first concept of redistribution. This refers to economic justice whereby economic inequalities produced by capitalist systems is addressed by focussing on the fair distribution of resources, wealth, labour, and opportunities. In schools this means funding inequalities between schools and providing equal access to quality teaching and resources for all. Injustice is not only economical but can also be cultural. Fraser's second concept, recognition implies cultural justice. In other words, respect for learners' diverse cultural identities, valuing indigenous knowledge systems and affirming diverse peoples' dignity and belonging. Fraser's third concept, representation, speaks to political justice and addresses who has voice in decision-making processes. Applied to schools, this pertains to who counts, who are excluded from educational policy formation or whose knowledge shapes the curriculum. In the context of Ubuntu and culturally responsive pedagogy, Fraser's framework allows us to identify global policy rhetoric such as SDGs that may promise justice but fail at representation in practice. An overt global disregard for international law by some signatory countries calls into ques-

tion the UN's Agenda for Sustainable Development goals of peace, non-violence, global citizenship, and cultural appreciation (UN, 2015, p. 17). Educationally, this is in sharp contrast with Freire's vision, which positions human rights and dignity at the heart of education (Freire, 2001, p. 59).

Teaching in neoliberal contexts demands cultural intelligence and a reimagined purpose for education, requiring both ideological shifts, i.e. understanding ourselves in relation to others and practical adoption of culturally responsive pedagogies. Ubuntu, as relational thinking, affirms one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others, fostering ethical and humane relationships grounded in compassion, forgiveness, generosity, and hospitality (Hlatshwayo, 2022). Ubuntu can offer a counter to the hollowed-out corporate culture of contemporary schooling.

Culturally responsive teaching pedagogies deliberately aims at incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into learning, promoting inclusivity and equipping teachers to navigate diverse classrooms. It involves empathetic, proactive efforts to respect and meet the needs of all learners (Maluleka, 2020, p. 141), preparing students to engage ethically and competently in complex social and educational environments. These concepts are anchored in broader theoretical traditions (critical pedagogy, African philosophy, social justice education), which keeps the overall orientation theoretical.

International-comparative perspectives within the Bagskol-project

Albeit with different foci, the importance and complexity of culture is formally acknowledged across countries, being represented within the Bagskol-project – Ukraine, Spain, Germany, France, Sweden – and this is the case in South Africa as well. Despite varied conceptualisation of culture, it generally forms a key site of social cohesion, citizenship formation, and national identity-building. Balancing national, patriotic identity building imperatives on the one hand whilst adhering to international goals and standards of diversity and democratic inclusion on the other, is however not easy, whether mid-conflict or post-conflict times.

In Ukraine, education has increasingly prioritised culture as a mechanism for national survival and cohesion, particularly in the context of war. While this emphasis is understandable given geopolitical threats, it tends to privilege a singular cultural narrative, leaving limited space for internal cultural plurality or alternative identities.

Similarly, in France, culture in education is framed through the republican ideal of universalism. Difference is tolerated insofar as it remains private while public education is expected to produce culturally neutral citizens aligned with a shared national identity. This system might project a sense of assimilation that prioritises sameness over plurality.

Germany and Sweden adopt progressive multi-cultural frameworks, especially in response to migration. In both systems, tolerance, democratic values, and intercultural competence is promoted. The approach to cultu-

ral diversity can however be perceived as instrumental, like something to be managed, integrated, or accommodated, rather than as epistemologically transformative.

Spain occupies a complex middle ground where culture is framed as territorially and historically specific. While regional identities (such as Catalan and Basque) are recognised within the education system, these recognitions might come across as reinforcing bounded cultural identities rather than fostering broader intercultural or pluriversal engagement. Across these European contexts, culture in education projects is centred around the nation state, where inclusion is conditional on integration into pre-existing cultural norms.

South Africa's educational approach to culture is shaped by different historical and ethical imperatives. Stemming from apartheid where cultures were rigidly segregated, the post-apartheid education project rejects monoculturalism. South African policy frameworks emphasise cultural diversity, multilingualism, social justice, and redress, positioning culture as dynamic, relational, and historically situated. This approach aligns with pluriversal thinking that recognises the coexistence of multiple ways of knowing, being, and belonging within a shared social space. While this approach is ideologically admirable, historic challenges remain at implementation level and are now exacerbated by a dominant neoliberal logic. There are however existing philosophies that can be internationally relevant. Ubuntu is but one such a framing which challenges individualistic and nationalistic models and gestures toward a more humane and ethical conception of culture, where interdependence is valued.

Conclusion

Culture and education are inseparable yet often treated as peripheral within contemporary education systems. In a fractured world, questions of culture, power, and belonging are urgent. Yosso's (2005) question, "Whose culture has capital?", exposes the privileging of dominant cultural norms and challenges the assumption that knowledge can be neutral or culturally unmarked. Drawing on Freire's (2001) vision of a humanitarian pedagogy grounded in justice and human dignity, education must reclaim its ethical purpose. In this vein, teaching becomes an act of critical awareness, naming oppression, interrogating power, and pursuing social transformation.

Ubuntu offers an ethical and pedagogical anchor. Rooted in relationality and mutual recognition, it foregrounds compassion, generosity, forgiveness, and hospitality as conditions for human flourishing. Learning must be grounded in learners' social, linguistic, and historical contexts while remaining open to global knowledge and shared human concerns.

Teachers cannot be reduced to technical implementers of curriculum. Culturally responsive pedagogies cultivate cultural intelligence, enabling teachers to navigate diversity, language equity, and historical injustice while preparing learners for ethical global citizenship. Beyond policy compliance, teaching must engage learners'

lived realities, languages, and ways of knowing with care and respect (Maluleka, 2020). These perspectives invite a reimagining of education as culturally grounded, ethically responsive, and deeply human, honouring cultural difference as a source of knowledge, resilience, and possibility.

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Dr. Jerome Joorst

Former lecturer in the department of Education Policy Studies at Stellenbosch University, teacher and trainer for Sociology of Education, main areas of work: Teachers and Learners' positionality in the education system, Rural Education, Social Justice Education.