Ubuntu: Developing New Pedagogic Relationships in Schools

School culture, which incorporates the complex relational pedagogy in use in the school, is often difficult to identify. Having read the material on Ubuntu (pronounced "oo-boon-too") used by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Nelson Mandela, we believe that these words and intents have a lot to commend this practical philosophy in underwriting long-term school philosophies, beliefs, and operations.

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Establishing a community defined by care for one another.

Professional-personal relationships underwrite the quality of teaching and learning in schools, and all former students can look back at their successful educational experiences in which they inevitably linked with teachers with whom they had had productive pedagogic relationships. The nature of this pedagogic relationship is situationally complex. In this paper we use the term *pedagogic* relationship because pedagogy is wider than a common interpretation of the term being a synonym for instruction. Max van Manen (1993) put the difference rather bluntly:

'It is possible to learn all of the techniques of instruction but to remain pedagogically unfit as a teacher. The preparation of educators obviously includes much more than the teaching of knowledge and skills, more even that a professional ethical code or moral craft. To become a teacher includes something that cannot be taught formally: the most personal embodiment of a pedagogical thoughtfulness' (p. 9).

Impacting on this wider view of pedagogic relationship, important research by the OECD (2021, p. 142) showed that socio-economic status (SES) influenced student-teacher relationships, with students from disadvantaged SES groups rating the relationship lowest on the three comparative measures.

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Ubuntu

Professor Toyin Falola (2022), wrote in his obituary of Archbishop Tutu: 'Desmond Tutu, the South African Anglican

reverend, champion of the communalistic humanist cause of Ubuntu, and hardcore lover of peace and unity, took his last breath on Sunday, December 26, 2021'. Falola (2022) continued to explain the sense of belongingness of Ubuntu, he wrote: 'Ubuntu: I am because you are, because we are. But beyond that, I am because I belong, and I have chosen to belong, to form a part of, participate in, and unite with others and their ideas and ideologies, despite the realistic existence of nuances and differences. This was perhaps the strongest lesson humans learnt in the year 2020.'

The Ubuntu concept gives a wider, necessary, communal dimension to Descartes's "je pense, donc, je suis," or cogito, ergo sum, meaning: I think therefore I exist; which has influenced the individualistic focus of Western thinking.

The African writer, Abebe Birhane (2017) makes the point that Descartes's individualistic focus is wrong: 'But for the most part, scientific psychology is only too willing to adopt individualistic Cartesian assumptions that cut away the webbing that ties the self to others. There is a Zulu phrase, *'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu',* which means 'A person is a person through other persons.' This is a richer and better account, I think, than 'I think, therefore I am.''

In our paper on *mattering* (MacNeill. Boyd, & Lehr, 2023, forthcoming) we support Birhane's position by showing the importance of others in developing an understanding of the dimensions of mattering. Interestingly, both Ubuntu and mattering sat at the very heart of Phil Jackson's creation of one of the most dominant sporting teams in the NBL, the Chicago Bulls (Jackson and Delehanty, 2014), "As a coach, I tried to convey to each player that I cared for him as a person, not just as a basketball factotum," said Jackson.

Ubuntu and Personhood
Ogude (2018, p.1) in *Introduction: Ubuntu and Personhood*, clearly sets out the Ubuntu personhood claims, which sharply contrasted with Descartes's individualistic narrative:

'If there is anything that defines Ubuntu and distinguishes it from other value systems, it is the fact that it is premised on a very specific understanding of personhood and that it is that the full development of personhood comes with a shared identity and the idea that an individual's humanity is fostered in a network of relationships - *I am because you are; we are because you are.'*

Ogude (2018, p. 3) expanded the concept of personhood further:

'... personhood is attained through complex processes of exchange and engagement as people interact and communicate with those around them and with the totality of their environment. It is for this reason that I argue here that Ubuntu as a specific strand of Africa's expression of personhood is a moral obligation and aspirational.'

Importantly, Ogude also reminds the readers that Ubuntu extends beyond human interconnectedness to a connectedness to '... the broader world, physical and spiritual- the entire universe' (p. 6).

In a historical sense, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was recognised as a major player in the resurrection of Ubuntu, and Ogude (2018, p. 7) observed:

'By appropriating Ubuntu to remediate the racially charged processes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Tutu was rescuing Ubuntu from the prison house of tradition and ethnicity and elevating it to a universal ethical and moral category. He was transforming the concept into an implement for clearing and thus destabilizing Apartheid racial hierarchies.'

The elephant in the Ubuntu room in South Africa remained economic sharing and economic security for all citizens, and the Ubuntu push faltered at this point.

The Ethical Philosophical Implications of Ubuntu and Soft Power
The concept of *soft power* consubstantially accompanied Ubuntu in the disestablishment of Apartheid in South Africa. In the 1990s Joseph Nye had developed the concept of soft power as a part of his analysis of America's declining global power:

'I first assessed American power resources in traditional economic and military terms, but felt that something was still missing. The US was also able to get the outcomes it wanted because of attraction rather than threats of coercion or payment. I called this 'soft power' and tried to understand its origins and dimensions. I distinguished it

from hard power behavior based on coercion or payment' (Nye, 2020, p. 5).

He further clarified the difference between hard power and soft power with two analogies: 'Hard power is push; soft power is pull. Or to extend a common metaphor, hard power is like brandishing carrots or stick; soft power is more like a magnet' (Nye, 2020, p. 6).

While the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in 1995 pushed the concept of Ubuntu in the democratisation of the country, Madise and Isike (2020) saw soft power embedded in Ubuntu diplomacy:

'The concept of Ubuntu diplomacy is of interest since as a soft power tool, it does not conform to the normative foundations of international relations that are centralized on competition and the accumulation of power over others, but rather, it champions a harmonious coexistence between nations based on a notion of global interdependence. Its soft power potential and agency lie in its ability to persuade states to prioritize shared interests in the absence of any outright dominance by any state, and as such, it is less prescriptive and open to dialogue and the plurality of ideas.'

And, 'Ubuntu is essentially a soft power philosophy, resource, and agency that carries with it an alluring moral authority that permeates all sectors that form South Africa's and Africa's social fabric' (Madise and Isike, 2020).

Ubuntu, Soft Power and School Leadership
In the literature on school leadership the concepts of Ubuntu and soft power must push against the values dominating the mainstream leadership hegemony. As we saw with Robert Greenleaf's *Servant Leadership* alternative beliefs and values are difficult to embed in much of the contemporary thinking. However, we argue that the social-emotional dimension of school education has been pushed aside, and with the growing problems exacerbated by COVID and youth suicide it is time to re-examine school culture, beliefs and values, which is where Ubuntu could develop a caring role, rolled into an attractive social-emotional, humanitarian, cultural wrapping.

In the apologue, 'Ubuntu' written by Stephen Lundin and Bob Nelson (2010), a fictional failing manager at an American company is introduced to the concept of Ubuntu, as a means of turning around his poor performance. While the storyline has a sermonising quality, the aspects of Ubuntu that the respected authors used to construct the narrative show how the philosophy could fit the teamwork processes in a transcultural experience. The issue is that those brought up in an Ubuntu cultural experience have lived Ubuntu all of their lives and it influences every action. Grabbing the Ubuntu philosophy and grafting into this American business context would be huge leap of faith. However, in the example below which is drawn from one of the author's first newsletters to staff, in a new school, we see how this can play out in establishing a school community where belonging, and the importance of connectedness is to be instilled.

Establishing an Ubuntu-embedded School Culture (Dayton Primary School)

Ubuntu: Why I have used it to encapsulate the ethos of Dayton Primary School
As you are all well aware from the materials that have been supplied by way of the school's prospectus, attending the initial staff information sessions, possible email correspondence if you sought information prior to applying for a position, or via a number of social media platforms I operate on, 'Ubuntu' is a term that I throw around often. It aligns with my notion of belonging, but in reality it actually goes a lot deeper than this and it is an ethos that I genuinely want to permeate the school. I would argue that if it's good enough for Phil Jackson to espouse when building one of the greatest NBL teams of an era, then I feel it is more than adequate for me to use in creating a school that I want to see as having a genuine impact within the system. In describing the term, or philosophy which it really is, I will speak in broad terms, not because I want to dumb it down, but simply because there is actually a great deal of complexity to the word which may have lost some of its meaning in being Westernised.

Ubuntu is a Nguni word and it is used to encapsulate our interconnectedness, common humanity and the responsibility we should hold for each other from a feeling of strong connection, something I really want us, as a collective, to embrace. To this end, you can see how belonging simplifies the idea. It is suggested that ubuntu is the awareness of the feeling of our basic desire to support others and to work and act towards each other with the collective good in the forefront of our minds. In other words, it potentially suggests we look beyond self and more towards community.

Ubuntu calls upon us to believe and feel that:
Your pain is my pain,
My wealth is your wealth,
Your salvation is my salvation. (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 1)

Nussbaum (2003, p. 2) described ubuntu beautifully as the 'the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community with justice and mutual caring. It has permeated most African countries for thousands of years and while it may be argued that in the present day these ideals have disappeared it does not distil the fact that, as a foundation school, it underpins the foundation on which we can strive to honour relationships as primary in achieving success as a school. Furthermore, it promotes the notion that no one individual can be self-sufficient and that, in fact, interdependence is vital if we are to achieve what we set out to do.'

If I were to simplify all I know or understand Ubuntu to be, I would say that in our context and again drawing from Nussbaum's work (2003) it is about:

- listening to and supporting others with the help of processes that create trust, fairness, shared understanding, dignity and harmony in relationships.
- the desire to build a caring, sustainable and just response to the community – in our case, school.
- learning how to work together with respect, compassion and dignity and justice and to re-organise resources accordingly.
- sharing knowledge, understanding, skills, resources and providing support to everyone in order to enable them to be successful and contribute to the school community.

Remember, I am because we are.

[Ray Boyd, 2023, first edition of Dayton Drumbeat, available from Ray.Boyd@education.wa.edu.au]

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