BOOK REVIEWS

Extended review by

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The value of twentieth century philosophy of education is beyond dispute, yet it should be acknowledged that current perspectives, seen in isolation, no longer serve the needs of twenty-first century education philosophy. Kuhn (1970) pertinently demonstrates that so-called scientific truths at a certain time in history may not remain ‘true’ when a paradigm shift happens. Philosophy of education tenets therefore need to be revisited continually so that professionals in the field can update research paradigms, stay abreast of developments and remain relevant in a changing world – and this is exactly what Yusef Waghid’s book will help them to achieve.

Turns or changes and their impact on twenty-first century thinking influence the evolution of philosophy and education individually and the philosophy of education collectively. Moreover, turns have both a guiding and a shaping impact on change (Sewell 2005). Following on the linguistic turn, the cultural turn, the interpretive turn, the narrative turn, the historical turn, the critical turn, the reflexive turn, the rhetorical turn, the postmodern turn and other turns (St. Pierre 2012; Peters and Biesta, in press), questions can be asked about the character of the next turn (Peters and Biesta, in press). The development of philosophy of education should incorporate benchmark concepts such as internationalisation, globalisation, reorganisation, diversification, lifelong learning, multi-skilling and the acquisition of information communication technology skills (Maree 2009). New thinking should endeavour not only to uncover intellectual resources for education philosophy but also to identify which topics and questions theorists and practitioners working in the field should focus on. Ideally, the results should enable 21st century education philosophers to deal with repeated education philosophy crossroads by building temporal and geographical bridges to facilitate movement across different traditions and practices and as well as ‘bridges towards a different future for philosophy of education’. Put differently: The philosophy of education should facilitate not only the building of
bridges to connect different traditions and practices, but, more importantly, the actual transitioning between ostensibly antithetical, opposing ends of philosophy of education-related continua. This can best be achieved by keeping in mind that ‘Everything happens at the surface, at the level of human activity’ (St. Pierre 2012, 494) and that science and philosophy in education in general should be ‘completely entangled’ (St. Pierre 2012, 500).

In the Introduction, Waghid argues that the literature on African educational philosophy typically contrasts traditional ethnophilosophy and ‘scientific’ African philosophy as two mutually exclusive philosophical fields. Whereas the first of these two philosophical strands is associated with African people’s cultural artefacts, narratives, folklore and music, the second concerns itself with the critical and transformative analysis of the justifications, elucidations and rationalisations of African reflection. These two conceptualisations of African philosophy give rise to different understandings of education. Education grounded in culturally related expression or action is, after all, quite different from education grounded in rationalised action and vice versa.

Opting for a middle-of-the-road, conciliatory stance, and arguing for an African philosophy of education grounded in rationalised, culture-contingent action, Waghid (in press, i) argues that African philosophy of education should be ‘guided by communitarian, reasonable and culture dependent action in order to bridge the conceptual and practical divide between African ethnophilosophy and “scientific” African philosophy’. In summary: Waghid proposes an African philosophy of education in which education is seen as a means of promoting resourcefulness, reflection and accountability. Ultimately, the aim is to facilitate movement that will promote justice in educative relations in Africa and also elsewhere in the world.

I believe the book can be labelled ‘a discernible historiographical event’ (Surkis 2012, 704) which is likely to cause a shift in the tectonic plates of philosophy of education. Waghid’s writings have already impacted the course of education philosophy globally. His name has become synonymous with creative developments in education philosophy, and his decision to bring together his insights in this new publication is most welcome. The book elaborates on the ideas put forward in his previous publications, covers the latest developments and trends in the field, connects many ‘loose’ dots, maps the way forward and constitutes a benchmark for everyone writing on the subject.

Waghid emphasises the need for an innovative, inclusive approach to the philosophy of education and explains the main components of his own unified theory and proposed practice. Drawing on his work over the past decades, he highlights the importance of unifying the two strands of African education philosophy, namely traditional ethnophilosophy and scientific philosophy. He critically examines generally accepted ideas on philosophy of education and interrogates what ‘best practice’ in this field entails. A pleasing feature of the book is a glossary of specialised words and terms used.

The following trio of ideas resonates through the book: fostering imagination,
facilitating liberation and stressing responsibility as pivotal to every aspect of human behaviour, and teaching and learning in particular. The point of departure is that, in order for any person to qualify as educated, she or he needs to display the twin characteristics of being able to articulate points of view in a lucid and respectful manner while also displaying a genuine willingness to listen. Also, such a person needs to be ‘morally mature’ and refined, by which Waghid means that he or she should display honesty, sincerity, faithfulness and empathy for others. He maintains that these virtues are sorely needed to bring about transformation in educational discourse in Africa. Looking at Waghid’s views through the lens of postmodern career counselling, it is evident that they strongly promote the notion of enabling people to design successful lives and make social contributions in a morally defensible, empathetic, respectful and responsible manner.

Three core ideas run through the seven chapters, namely reasonableness (rationality), moral maturity (identity) and deliberative dialogue (considered exchange of ideas). In the first three chapters, Waghid discusses African philosophy of education in terms of a defence communitarian thought (Chapter 1); a contemplation of African metaphysics and epistemology (Chapter 2); and the role of religion, ethics and aesthetics in African cultures (Chapter 3). Waghid then examines the place of ubuntu in African education (Chapter 4); considers its link with democratic citizenship education (Chapter 5); investigates its association with human rights and cosmopolitan justice (Chapter 6); argues against exclusion in education on the African continent (Chapter 7); and finally touches on the question of terrorism (Postscript).

In chapters 1 to 4, Waghid thus builds on the notion of communitarian thought by elaborating on the concept of African philosophy of education as set out in the Introduction. He proposes an African philosophy of education that can help resolve the numerous problems confronting the African continent. He adopts a pragmatic approach informed by ubuntu (humaneness). In chapters 5 to 7, he suggests ways in which a communitarian approach can be used to improve our understanding of democratic citizenship education. He also suggests ways of ending practices that alienate, hurt and isolate human beings. Examples of such practices include human rights abuses; gender inequality; and discrimination based on religion, sexual preference, ethnicity, age and socio-economic status. The marginalisation of women on the African continent receives particular attention. Waghid indicates how an African philosophy of education can guide educational praxis (i.e. teaching and learning) in African contexts.

Waghid demonstrates how African education philosophy can influence teaching praxis in school classrooms and in university lecture rooms through its ability to enhance teaching and learning (learning facilitation) in these contexts. By marrying the twin notions of philosophy of education and teaching and learning praxis at university level, and showing how this can be done, Waghid reveals his insight into what tertiary training is actually all about.
In Chapter 1, Waghid explores African thought and practices as key constituents of African education philosophy. Here, Waghid examines the differences between African ethnophilosophy of education and a scientific African philosophy of education, and he concludes that African philosophy of education is communitarian, reasonable and culture-dependent. He warns that criticism of this philosophy should not be taken lightly and discusses the contexts in which the concept is used.

In Chapter 2, Waghid examines African metaphysics and epistemology, especially in terms of what existence means in an African context. Some implications of the conception of a person for educational dialogue(s) in Africa are investigated. He uses a poststructuralist understanding of metaphysics to outline African metaphysics and epistemology. He discusses the ‘material person’ versus ‘immaterial being’ debate and offers a poststructuralist (Derridian in particular) analysis of the individual versus community thesis, which typifies discourses in and about African philosophy and African education philosophy. He concludes that African metaphysics and epistemology should transcend dual oppositions such as materialness versus spiritualness (immaterialness) and the individual versus the community. He enunciates a Derridian-orientated notion of human engagement in terms of what it means to act responsibly (metaphysically) and critically (epistemologically).

In Chapter 3, Waghid discusses a communitarian African education philosophy and the cultural enactments of African people’s religion, ethics and aesthetics in terms of this philosophy. He believes that personal, public and professional factors inform African education philosophy (and, in fact, any discourse on the philosophy of education). He argues that the personal dimension of African education philosophy is defined by personal beliefs regarding notions of doing what is good, right and worthwhile in education. This dimension facilitates understanding of aspects of education such as subjects to be taught, the curriculum and education policy. The public dimension of African education philosophy, on the other hand, aims at guiding the practice of ‘the many’ such as educators, policy analysts, intellectuals and politicians.

In Chapter 4, Waghid discusses communitarian understandings of the implications of ubuntu for education in Africa. He explains how such understandings can facilitate self-actualisation, self-construction, life designing and making social contributions. These understandings can also promote a sense of a ‘shared-fate community’ in (re-) defining the quintessence of African education. African educational institutions can help curb the atrocities and human rights violations ravaging the African continent by promoting a sense of morality and nurturing ubuntu as part of their pedagogical role.

In Chapter 5, Waghid elaborates on the ideas expressed in Chapter 4 by proposing that African education can help create a culture of humanity and responsibility in schools and nurture ‘a politics of humanity’ in teacher education, thereby promoting and strengthening ubuntu.

In Chapter 6, taking his cue from Nickel (2007), Waghid builds on the idea that human rights are aimed ultimately at articulating and imposing international
norms to prevent government abuse of citizens. International peace and security can be advanced by acknowledging that all human beings are born free and equal and entitled to dignity and basic rights. Such acknowledgement will curb human rights abuses such as detention without trial, suppression of political dissent and discrimination on the basis of, for instance, race, gender, religion, socio-economic status and nationality. Waghid first theorises about the reasons for human rights abuses on the African continent and then argues in support of cosmopolitan justice from a Butlerian (2004a, 2004b) and Appiahian (2006) perspective before advancing the Rowlandian (2008) notions of forgiveness, moral and epistemic duty and love or philia.

In Chapter 7, Waghid narrates some of the experiences of women in the rural areas of Greater Sekhukhuneland in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. These women, who provide holding environments for their families in an almost heroic manner, live desperate lives and often suffer psychological abuse in a strictly male-controlled environment. Waghid uses the stories of the Sekhukhune women to exemplify the extent of gender-based discrimination and exclusion in Africa. Most poignantly, women are often excluded from education thereby denying them their best chance of escaping their restrictive circumstances.

In the Postscript, Waghid argues that terrorism (as a form of political violence) is caused by uncertainty, hopelessness and instability, which gives rise to human deprivation, exclusion, dehumanisation and fear and, in the long run, outrage. Education, he maintains, can help people experience each other more authentically through deliberative engagement and thereby contribute to a reduction in terrorist activities. He proposes such engagement between those who perpetrate acts of violence, on the one hand, and those who are subjected to such acts, on the other.

In this book, Waghid proposes a novel, workable framework that educationists can use to help people in Africa deal with human rights violations, design successful lives and make social contributions. He advocates an African philosophy of education that can successfully address some of the major problems (be they social, cultural or political) confronting people on the African continent.

Waghid’s book is of immense theoretical and practical value in promoting justice in educational contexts and environments in Africa and elsewhere in the world. This book is more than a guide for theorists and practitioners working in the philosophy of education field. I believe psychologists, teachers, academics, lawyers and those in the healthcare environment will also find it of great value and interest. In my view, it should be made compulsory reading for all professionals working in these fields.

The following words seem apt in concluding this review: ‘But now, as we see whole populations traumatized by war, famine, plague, disaster, and political oppression, our individualistic arguments are no longer persuasive. We must find larger scale, group forms of intervention to escalate the rate of transformation or the balance may very well shift further in the direction of global self-destruction’ (Bloom 1998, 208).
In recognition of Waghid’s contribution to higher education locally, capacity development and social justice in South Africa, the National Research Foundation (NRF) honoured him with an ‘NRF Special Recognition Award: Champion of Research Capacity Development at Higher Education Institutions in South Africa’ in 2011. On the global platform, he was recently honoured with an invitation from the world-renowned philosopher of education, Denis Phillips (Stanford University), to submit a contribution on communitarian thought which was included in the SAGE Encyclopaedia for Educational Theory and Practice in 2013. The inclusion of his thoughts on communitarianism in this publication corroborates his global standing as educational philosopher on communitarianism. Unsurprisingly, therefore, he was appointed as sectional editor for the International handbook of interpretation in educational research (in press), and Board Member of Consulting Editors for the Online encyclopaedia of educational philosophy and theory.

This award and the many others he has received are an appropriate way of honouring a man who is making an amazing contribution towards changing the face of the philosophy of education in his time.

REFERENCES