ON SPEAKING TO VIOLENCE IN POST-APARTHEID SCHOOLS

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Abstract. Post-apartheid South African schools are contending with unprecedented incidents and rates of violence that have not only brought untold humiliation to learners and teachers alike but have, in many instances, forced schools to redefine the way in which they function, and indeed, if they function. Repeated forms of condemnation, policy re-strategising and punitive measures have not only been inadequate, but have laid bare the sheer unpredictability of violence and its forms. In offering a dual-dialogue – one in addressing violence and the other directed at the inadequate response from education authorities to violence – we offer an interpretative analysis on the one hand, of how to think about violence, and on the other hand, about how a citizenship education of becoming can deal with the unpredictable consequences of violence in its own potentiality. We commence by looking at violence in South African schools, followed by an exploration of encounters, and summoning others to speech as a means through which to speak to violence.

Keywords: post-apartheid schools, violence, democratic citizenship education, co-belonging, community of becoming

Introduction

Apartheid has been held responsible for many of the social ills and pains of South African society. This blight has been particularly severe in schools that played a revolutionary role, sometimes a violent one, in combating apartheid itself. Township schools, in particular, have indelibly been branded by their violent forms of protest and destruction – so much so, that even in the absence of a worthy contestation, the violence continues to seep through the classrooms and playgrounds of these schools. The profound irony is, of course, that schools were used as both a weapon against social injustice, and a means towards social justice. A widespread assumption was that once the path to social justice was

embarked through the abolition of apartheid, these schools would be prominent agencies in the promotion of peace. Yet, two decades into democracy the violence continues to determine how, and indeed whether, schools function at all. According to Zulu, Urbani and Van der Merwe (2004), violence at schools has gained momentum, as generation upon generation have become socialised into violence.

Violence upon violence

Reports on violence in schools – such as, the South African Council for Educators (SACE) *School-based violence report: An overview of school-based violence in South Africa* (2011), and *The dynamics of violence in South African schools: Report* (2013) – are in agreement that the various types of violence are influenced by both social and gender dynamics. While there are more obvious forms of violence, such as corporal punishment or bullying, there are more subtle forms of violence, such as spreading malicious rumours, cyber-bullying, threats, and sexual harassment. Hazing and initiation, for instance, according to Burton (2008), are more prevalent in private and well-established schools than in poorer or township schools. Moreover, violence occurs from learner to learner (between or across genders); from teacher to learner; from learner to teacher; from teacher to principal; from principal to teacher; from principal to learner; from learner to principal; from parent to learner, to teacher, to principal. Leoschut and Bonora (2007) contend that the increased exposure and reinforcement of aggression and violence serve to normalise violence – contributing to an increasingly violent society. This means that for many children violence has become such a part of their daily lives that it is no longer considered abnormal or problematic. In this regard, the prevalence of violence in schools is not necessarily considered as an unusual occurrence.

The attempts by teachers to remedy these multiple forms of violence have been largely inadequate – even hopeless. Such attempts have sometimes contributed to further violence, often justified by teachers as the only language through which to counter violence. Although illegal, but institutionally sanctioned at many schools, corporal punishment has been described as the most common internal violence perpetrated against learners. Male teachers, in particular, have displayed disturbing forms of aggression, such as physical assault and rape (Mncube and Harber, 2013). Reports, according to Mncube and Harber (2013),

include the rape of a 13 year old primary school learner; physical assault of a learner, which involved being grabbed by the neck and pushed down the stairs; and a teacher attempting to drown a learner in a fish pond, requiring a police officer to rescue the learner. In another incident related by Raubenheimer (Mncube and Harber, 2013), a learner attempted to commit suicide after his physical assault by a teacher became public knowledge.

Inasmuch, however, as teachers inflict violence onto learners – whether through corporal punishment or derogatory language – learners inflict violence onto teachers. According to the SACE 'School-based Violence Report' (2011), an important finding was the increase in reports of learners violently attacking teachers – with schools reporting on verbal abuse, threats, physical violence, and sexual violence against teachers. Relating the findings of the *2012 National School Violence Study,* Burton and Leoschut (2013) report that school leaders generally felt that their schools were places of safety for both their teachers and learners. Teachers, however, were less likely to express this view with only 70% of teachers reporting that they felt safe when teaching and 73.4% thought learners felt safe while on school premises. Reports from the Western Cape Education Department confirm that seven learners in 2011 and five in 2012 were expelled for physical assault or threatening behaviour. One of the teacher unions, the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA), acknowledges that abuse by teachers is as rife as abuse by learners. Nevertheless teachers are reluctant to report abusive attacks for fear of losing face in the classroom or further intimidation. *The School-based violence report: An overview of school-based violence in South Africa* (2011) states that while attacks on teachers are underreported, they highlight the vulnerability of teachers in South African schools as well as the problem of reports of school-based violence which construct teachers as the sole perpetrators.

Responses from the education authorities have taken many forms. These include several policy documents, such as Department of Basic Education's *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (2002) or the recently produced *Building a Culture of Responsibility and Humanity in Our Schools: A Guide for Teachers* (2011). Other strategies by the DoBE have included the prohibition of corporal punishment (Republic of South Africa 1996b) as stipulated in the South African Schools Act (1996). With regard to discipline the SA Schools Act (Section 8) empowers School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to adopt a learners' code of conduct

after consulting teachers, learners, and parents, which is intended to establish a disciplined and purposeful school environment. Related documents and guidelines have included *Alternatives to Corporal Punishment* (Department of Education, 2000a), *Signposts for Safe Schools* (South African Police Service and Department of Education, 2002). Other measures have included various safety programmes, such as ‚adopt a cop', ‚captain crime stop', and 'Bambanani' (Joubert, 2008). And in an attempt to regulate teacher conduct the South African Council for Educators (SACE) prescribe that teachers should be guided by the *Code of Professional Ethics* (SACE, 2002). However, with children more likely to encounter violence at their schools than within their homes or communities (Leoschut and Bonora (2007: 107) and with teachers resorting to more aggressive forms of so-called discipline (Mncube and Harber, 2013; Zulu *et al*., 2004), it does not seem that schools are effectively dealing with violence.

Given this dire situation, perhaps the time has come to re-consider and imagine new forms of response to violence.

Dis-enframing violence

A political philosopher, Chantal Mouffe's (2000), has argued that violence is to be accepted as part of human nature and as part of something called the 'dimension of the political'. For Mouffe, the rationalist view of human nature, which denies negative traits within society, such as violence, is not the necessary basis for democracy, but is instead its weakest point. She argues that the political community should not be seen as an empirical referent but rather as a discursive surface. To this end the political community is constituted by a multiplicity of beings and expectations. This means that there will always be those on the inside and those on the outside; those who are violated and those who are not. It also means that one of the ideals of post-apartheid South Africa, namely violence-free schools, is unrealisable. As a discursive surface, schools are not only open to diverse ways of thinking and being but they are also perpetually susceptible and vulnerable to violence. In other words, the idea or ideal of a violence-free school can never be realised because the political community of a school is constructed along a 'social imaginary'. Violence as part of human nature – which is akin to making us humans and therefore open to practices and beliefs of exclusion and discrimination – means that the 'social imaginary' of a violence-free society is inherently unattainable.

If we accept, as Mouffe does, that violence is to be accepted as part of human nature, then we have to accept the fact that learners in our schools possess the capacity for violence. Schools are not 'enframed' – that is, they are neither fenced off from their respective communities, nor are they limited to orthodox practices. It is therefore impractical to expect that schools might function in a vacuum and be disconnected from the society in which they find themselves. School dynamics are in a state of flux. Similarly, the types of violence that confront the society are unpredictable and uncontainable. We cannot, therefore, assume that the antidote to violence is the teaching of a particular form of citizenship since this would assume that we can compartmentalise or 'enframe' both violence and citizenship. Following Mouffe's argument it would be important to resist any temptation to ascribe a common political identity to all South Africans. Instead, what might be contended is that post-apartheid South Africa, while accepting 'submission to certain authoritative rules of conduct' (Mouffe, 1992), also accepts that different communities might have differing conceptions of the good. This also suggests that post-apartheid South Africa, while connected by a common bond, is without a definite shape and is in a process of continuous re-enactment. This means that we cannot think of communities, schools and schooling as a collective – because this would imply being assimilated into a dominant culture which shares a common good and therefore always runs the risk of exclusion. If we accept that schools are not 'enframed' (limited to orthodox practices) and if we accept that schools are constituted through violence by virtue of it being an accepted part of human nature, then it does mean that we have to start looking at schools differently. Learners, together with the homes and communities that constitute them, co-belong to a common bond of being at school. And the violence that they bring through their violations co-belong to the communities through which they are constituted. The response from schools to counter the violence, therefore, cannot be 'enframed' (that is, limited to orthodox practices) by what ought to be taught at schools or by what disciplinary procedures ought to be implemented.

On encountering and summoning others to speech

To enact one's humanity requires that one recognises the frailties within oneself and others and actually acts upon someone else's vulnerability. Cavell (1979) posits that related to one's connection with the other is the view that one has

to acknowledge humanity in the other, of which the basis for such action lies in oneself: 'I have to acknowledge humanity in the other and the basis of it seems to lie in me' (Cavell, 1979, p. 433). To this end it is insufficient to have knowledge of another's vulnerability, such as a student being bullied, and not act against it. The conception of responsibility we are arguing for here is strongly connected to a moral action that is informed by a sense of fairness and justice. To Derrida (1994) justice comes in the form of responsibility to the other as difference – that every individual has a responsibility to live with the other and to treat the otherness of the other justly. In not acting responsibly one does not enact one's humanity in relation to the other and so doing fails to recognize that one's humanity is so because of a relational co-belonging. This means that the teacher would need to re-consider her response to the bully. Instead of humiliating or excluding her, she would need to enact her responsibility to the bully by recognizing her humanity and then her vulnerability. The propensity for violence, while conceived and perceived as acts and positions of strength, might not necessarily be so. Rather, it might be better understood as an enactment of a vulnerability which has found a misplaced expression.

Schools, as constitutive of and constituted by society, have to be spaces where the cultivation of responsibility and humanity are uppermost in pedagogical encounters. The notion of a pedagogical encounter vis-à-vis being a citizen is premised on the following three considerations: driving oneself to act freely to actively taking a stand; being answerable to others; experiencing others rather than knowing them with certainty on the basis of curbing one's rush to judgement about others. Put differently, acting democratically means to announce your position. And, when people announce themselves they demonstrate the capacity to actualise their equality – that is, their ability to think, speak, and act freely to take a stand, or what Rancière (2007) refers to as disrupting the chains of reasons. Secondly, acting as an intelligible citizen actually involves summoning other people to use their intelligence – that is, 'an intelligible citizen is one who obliges the other person 'to realise his [her] capacity' (Rancière, 1991, p.15). Summoning people to use their intelligence is in fact to remind them that they can see and think for themselves, to prompt them about their abilities and capacities, and not just always relying on others to see and think for them. Unlike traditional views of citizenship education that aim to educate people to speak, a reconsidered citizenship education starts from the assumption that a person is already

intelligible: that is to say, a 'speaking being' (Rancière, 1991, p.11). To be an amateur citizen is to deal with what is imperfectly put on the table by others – without authoritatively rushing to judgement about say imperfect formulations of the concept democracy. As such the amateur citizen allows for the evocation and enactment of yet-to-be lived and realised experiences.

This means that what teachers teach and what learners learn have to be conceptualised and enacted from, and within a basis of responsible action, which will be expressed through a humane connectedness. A teacher's relationship with learners ought therefore to be shaped by an acknowledgement that they be considered as fellow human beings, and therefore respected. This form of respect emanates from a democratic iteration which not only encourages dialogue but is informed by a 'talking back'. As such, learners participate in the acknowledged co-belonging, they recognise their own potentiality in shaping their own views, without fear of being disregarded or humiliated. By engaging with views different to what they have known and believed to be true teachers create new pedagogical encounters and cultivate for themselves new ways of becoming. By teachers not acknowledging their learners as fellow beings and by learners not acknowledging their teachers as fellow beings, their engagement becomes merely that of talking to the other - and at times, talking past the other. In not recognizing the vulnerabilities inherent in each other the potentialities for both teachers and learners are not only impaired but stunted in terms of becoming.

On the cultivation of a school community of becoming

Following Aristotle, Agamben (1999) distinguishes two kinds of potentiality: generic potentiality such as saying that a child has the potential to know; and potentiality as becoming, associated with someone having knowledge or an ability to do and become. It is potentiality as becoming that interests Agamben, such as a teacher having the potential to teach (to do). On the one hand, a child who has the potential to learn (to do) is obliged to experience an alteration through learning – that is becoming another (Agamben, 1999). If there is no alteration in thought or opinion, then perhaps learning has not taken place. On the other hand, the child who has the potential to know (generic potentiality), 'is instead [one with] potential … on the basis of which he can also *not* bring his knowledge into actuality by *not* making work', that is, by not learning.

In other words, the potential of learners to learn does not always mean they will actually learn. Rather, the potential of learners to learn can also have the effect whereby they do not learn – that is, a matter of their potentiality not passing into actuality – either through an unwillingness or incapacity to learn. A student's true potential to learn is associated with bringing all her incapability or impotentiality (potential not to be) to the act of learning without being annulled in actuality. To have potentiality does not mean that such potentiality will inevitably be actualised. In fact there can be no mis-educational experiences, not least ones that are violent in character; that bring about an annulment of the very potentialities they should have actualised. Lewis (2014) explains that what makes us human, according to Agamben (1999), is precisely the capability to not be, to remain im-potential; the potential to act otherwise or to be otherwise.

A school community of becoming is one that is potentially in the making – it is not yet but potentially it can be. As such, there is more hope in it (the becoming school community) to deal with violence- for at least three reasons: Firstly, a school community of becoming is not yet actually such a community, that is, a community that can deal with violence. It is potentially so with all its possibilities for failure in being such a community. In such a school community, the affiliate individuals, neither share an ascribed identity nor do they define themselves mainly in reference to their differences. Learners as members of a school community are affiliated on the grounds of being persons. In other words, members of a school community contest one another's membership in relation to prioritising their humanity. And if being human implies honouring the sacredness of life, members of a school community become internally disconnected from using violent ways to cause bodily harm, even death to others. As members of a community of becoming that co-belong, individuals of whatever identity endeavour to disrupt incidences of violence for the sake of being human and living their humanity. Such a school community of becoming does not make the end of violence its aim, instead the struggle against violence becomes a continuous human experience.

Secondly, a school community of becoming comprises 'whatever being[s]' in its singularity (Agamben, 1993, p. 20). Lewis (2011, p. 589) clarifies that Agamben's 'whatever being[s]' implies not belonging to any set or class. Agamben's occupation with 'whatever being', clarifies Lewis, is a counterpoise to what he conceives as the learning society's instrumental theory of potentiality

– that is, one which reduces potentiality as a means to an end. Instead, to Agamben, potentiality is a means without end – which according to Lewis, 'is a form of belonging that does not impose predetermined conditions of belonging (such as this or that identity, intelligence, or class)' (Lewis, 2011, p. 589). In this sense, members of a school community are not members because they belong to a school community but rather, for 'its being-*such,* for belonging itself' (Agamben, 1993, p. 2). So to consider members of a school community in their singularities would be tantamount to seeing them as beings such as those that can prevent or disrupt violence. By virtue of co-belonging in 'whatever singularity', learners would find new and unimagined ways of connecting with one another in the face of opportunities to deliberate – that is, listening and talking back to one another.

Thirdly, a school community of becoming also emphasises 'the suspension of the transition from potential to act, and the maintenance of impotentiality within potentiality' (Mills, 2008, p. 109). To be considered as a community that can be able to thwart violence is also to recognise that the act towards eliminating violence might not be without its predicaments. This in itself would make the desire to eradicate violence a potentiality or a possibility. This means that a school community intent on countering violence has the potential to do so and simultaneously the impotentiality to do so – that is, they are not able to do so. But the potentiality members of a school community of becoming has, makes it possible for members of such a community to exercise their freedom in their own singularity – 'a singularity that is *finite*, and nonetheless, indeterminable' (Agamben, 1993, p. 67). What this implies is that a school community of becoming in the quest to quell violence, freely expresses itself in a determinate and simultaneously in an indeterminate way in relation to whatever is 'within an outside' of the event. For Agamben (1993) 'outside' is at the threshold – 'a passage' that gives access to the event. More specifically, a school community of becoming is at the threshold. In not belonging to any set or class - that is, in 'whatever being', a school community of becoming is open to any number of configurations and reconfigurations, thereby experiencing ' being-*within* an *outside*' (Agamben, 1993, p. 67, italics in original). Our understanding of 'being-within an outside' implies that a school community of becoming sees itself as a community that sees violence from 'within an outside'. Although the violence to be dealt with is outside of a community's reach, it (the community) grasps an understanding of the violence as if it is experienced by them (the community). And being in such

a singularity at once places the community of becoming in a position to think of possibilities and impossibilities as to how the violence can be combated.

Through a reconsidered view of citizenship education learners are taught to bring about change without privileging any dominant cultural community – meaning that change is neither facilitated nor cultivated through the dominance of the collective but through the co-belonging to multiple singularities. And through a reconsidered view of citizenship education learners are initiated into practices of speech whereby they exercise the 'free use of the self' to speak their minds, yet suspend judgement that would ensure that communication continues even in the face of sometimes troublesome and disruptive speech. What follows from such a reconsidered view of citizenship education is that a community of becoming – that is, a community that is yet to be – is one that can contend with whatever comes its way, including acts of violence, because they recognise that communities of becoming are shaped by fluidity, rather than by something which is fixed or fixated. If learners are to be taught what it means to co-belong as humans they are in fact initiated into pedagogical activities that value respect for the sacredness of human life. Similarly, through a reconsidered view of citizenship education, learners are initiated into practices to see things differently and understand that they do not privilege this or that community or the dominant community to which they loyally support. They are taught that their beliefs and actions ought not to be pre-determined by the community to which they belong, since this would mean that if all the teenagers in a community indulge in binge drinking then everyone ought to be doing it. Rather, as a community of co--belonging, they see things in their singularity in relation to whatever is good for all. This would mean that if they see or know of something, which violates who they are or violates others, they would not be afraid to speak out against it.

In sum, there seems to be a dyadic relationship between the idea of a pedagogical encounter and that of a reconsidered view of citizenship education. A pedagogical encounter guides citizenship education in particular ways and, in turn, a reconsidered view of citizenship education alters meanings that constitute a pedagogical encounter – thus offering the spaces necessary for new and unanticipated encounters and meanings. Unlike narrowly linking citizenship education to exercising rights and responsibilities and experiencing a sense of belonging, a reconsidered view of citizenship education views the citizen as someone who equally exercises thoughts and speech, intelligibly encourages others

to see things for themselves, and suspends a rush to judgement about imperfect others and their encounters. Moreover, citizenship education of becoming has in mind evoking the potentiality of learners to cultivate communities of becoming where they do not belong and share a common identity. Such a reconsidered view of citizenship education considers learners as humans who co-belong as they endeavour to be attentive to the issues of the day. Only when learners are taught to articulate speech that is open to deliberation and different ways of thinking and being would they remain part of a community of becoming – a community that does not expect of them to belong, share a common identity, and to negotiate difference.

A reconsidered view of citizenship education is also connected to the practice of seeing things differently. What seeing things in a different way also projects is the impossibility or impotentiality to see things in the same way. What a reconsidered view of citizenship education foregrounds seems to be connected to a potentiality of becoming. Consequently it would be appropriate to talk about a citizenship education of becoming vis-à-vis potentiality. In considering how such a view of citizenship education potentially guides the notion of community Agamben argues that the coming community is one whereby '[whatever] singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong, without any representable condition of belonging' (Agamben, 1993, p. 86). For Agamben the community of becoming exists now – that is, a community to which all belong without claiming to belong and which is engendered 'along a line of sparkling alternation on which common nature and singularity, potentiality, and act change roles and interpenetrate' (Agamben, 1993, p. 20). The fact that 'the coming community' is not constituted by belonging means that learners would be initiated into practices on the basis of a genuine commitment to bring about change without privileging any dominant cultural community. Bringing about change means enacting practices of engagement and deliberation which includes listening to views that might be either disagreeable or repugnant. It implies a willingness to engage from the perspective of the other – if only for a moment. Change for the better is distinguishable from a change for the worse when an individual recognises her responsibility in relation to the other and enacts that recognition in a just way.

Citizenship education that educates learners about potentially coming into community also has in mind bringing learners 'into a communication without

the incommunicable' (Agamben, 1993, p. 65). This means that learners would be initiated into a form of communication where nothing deters the communication that unfolds. In other words the communication between learners and teachers will not be subjected to unjustifiable constraints. That is, learners are taught that nothing should remain unsaid in a community of becoming (Agamben, 1993) – speech should not be articulated without any form of imposition by another person. Learners are thus encouraged to speak their minds in an atmosphere of freedom and openness.

In conclusion, firstly, to be initiated into what it means to honour the sacredness of human life, learners should be taught what relations amongst humans involve – how they co-belong. And teaching learners that as individuals they co-belong they build relations of care and trust in the classroom as part of an ongoing critical lesson in human relations (Noddings, 2006). This implies that learners are taught not to stand by silently while their co-learners do things they believe are genuinely wrong, such as showing contempt for others, or when they witness the humiliation of someone who might be different in terms of sexual orientation, religion, or ability. Secondly, when learners are taught to recognise their responsibility in relation to others they are in fact initiated into discourses that emphasise whatever does not inflict harm, neither is it experienced as harmful by others. Thirdly, a reconsidered view of citizenship education teaches learners what it means to see things from 'within an outside' without rushing to judgement. In other words, a reconsidered view of citizenship education ought to teach learners what it means to be 'within an outside' – that is to be within violence and to explain it without rushing to judgement in their explications about violence. Likewise, learners should be taught that violence is not meaningless for some humans. Rather, learners should be taught that such understandings of violence work against being human as it leaves people vulnerable under attack of such inhumane actions. In a different way, learners should be taught the courage to resist violence and that a betrayal of violence is not admitting defeat but is actually inspiring in the quest to be human. In this way a reconsidered view of citizenship education can go a long way in teaching learners to co-belong. It will be a practice of potentially becoming.

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