Unhu/Ubuntu and Its Relationship with Civics and Citizenship Education

B.C. Muropa, L.P. Kusure, D. Makwerere, R. Kasowe and Z. Muropa

INTRODUCTION

The writers adopt the definition of unhu proffered by Nziramasanga Commission (1999: 62) as “a concept that denotes a good human being, well behaved and morally upright person”. The Nziramasanga Commission goes on to observe that some of the characteristics of unhu/ ubuntu is that a person with unhu is a well-rounded, respectable and respected human being.

The same Commission insists that as extensions of the home, the schools up to tertiary level must teach Unhu to the youths. Unhu entails being guided by the right conduct. This led the Greek philosopher, Plato to believe that proper conduct leads to harmony. Unhu is not simply a philosophical issue of good and bad. It is doing something, saying something that is approved of by Zimbabwean society. It is doing things correctly and properly as is determined by the Zimbabwean society. For example: Wearing one’s trousers inside-out ‘hazvina unhu’, (is indecent) putting on a bra when you are a man ‘hazvina unhu’, coming up with a war cry which is full of dirty words, ‘hazvina unhu’. It is just not correct, it is not proper. According to Nafukho (2006) Unhu/Ubuntu is a word from the Southern African Nguni language family of Ndebele, Swazi and Zulu. It means humanity or fellow feeling. Bangura (2005) argued that Ubuntu served as the spiritual foundation of nearly all African societies. Bangura (ibid) further notes that it is an African world view enshrined in the maxim ‘umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu’ which means a person is a person through other persons. Guvamombe (2012) sums it up by saying: life in Africa is not about individuals. It is about everyone, me and them. It is about the family name, the individual and societal image, the collective dignity - everything. Kamwangamulu(1999:37) observes that unhu/ubuntu is African humanism or it is “the art of being human”. Sindane(1995) suggests that unhu/ubuntu is a way of life that positively contributes to the sustenance of the wellbeing of a people, community or society. It is a process that promotes the common good of a people or society. Aristide (2005) observes that unhu/ubuntu goes straight to the community’s wellbeing. Unhu/ubuntu generates a social love story rooted in brotherhood. Makgoba(1996) posits that ubuntu is unique in the sense that it fosters man’s respect for himself, others and the environment. It is an invisible unifying force. Venter (2002) and Higgs (2003) echo Makgoba’s view. To them unhu / ubuntu and communalism are important in African formal and non-formal.
**CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION**

The citizenship curriculum is based on key concepts of democracy, justice, rights and responsibilities, identities and diversities. Young people need to understand politics and how government operates. The citizen curriculum aims to develop students’ ability to participate in community and wider societies as informed, critical and responsible citizens. For example, when young people learn about human rights, diversity and inequality, they might decide to set up a project to address racism in their school or local community.

The Nziramasanga Commission (1999:349) observed that in a democracy, a citizen’s rights, duties and responsibilities encompass the right to be heard, to participate in governance, to have a guarantee of fair treatment and protection and to enjoy the basic freedoms. The Commission went on to say that these rights, duties and responsibilities should be part of a person with genuine unhu/ubuntu and, therefore, should be taught through both formal and informal education. Thus making education a ‘useful tool for character and citizenship development’. The findings were that the education system should develop a spirit of national consciousness and patriotism through teaching youths about themselves, their country and its government system and functions. Schools were called upon to develop a whole and well-rounded person with unhu/ubuntu.

Findings by the Commission called for youths who are loyal, responsible, productive and respectful. The majority of respondents stressed that this was a ‘necessity’ (1999:351). Findings also called for citizenship education to be taught to adults through well organised mass media on a daily basis. Zimbabwe should not adopt foreign perspectives of human rights wholesale.

Matereke (2011), argues that concerns about erosion of unhu/ubuntu in Zimbabwe can be meaningfully addressed by taking citizenship education seriously and making schools and institutions of higher learning sites for democratic engagements. He goes on to say that citizenship education entails patriotism, tolerance, respect and recognition of others. Matereke (2011: 3) looks at Western influence or what he calls Western Modernity as something that has played havoc on African value systems. Afro- optimists, the likes of Matereke, look at citizenship education as a vehicle that would deconstruct negative thinking about Africa. Schools were called upon to develop a whole and well-rounded person with ubuntu/unhu.

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Every society has its own measure of decency. In the Zimbabwean society, unhu/ubuntu (acceptable behaviour) is a powerful and pervading force. There is, however, a disturbing tendency towards erosion of unhu/ubuntu especially among the youth. Against this background it is imperative that the concept of unhu/ubuntu be interrogated.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The significance of the study is to raise awareness and debate on the concept of unhu/ubuntu among all members of society especially among the youth. Such a critical examination of unhu/ubuntu would lead to increased appreciation of human dignity, decency, and respect among all people.

**THE LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The major limitation of this research was that some respondents may have given information that was ‘socially acceptable’ contrary to their notion and practice of unhu/ubuntu. The researchers adhered to the set of guiding questions as reflected in the research instrument. Despite this limitation the results of this research would be a useful basis for further research.

**SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

This research focused on one province of Zimbabwe mainly as an exploratory study that would form the basis of an extensive national study. The conceptions and practices of Unhu/Ubuntu were the subject of the present research.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research design was used in this study us group discussion and interviews. This design enabled the researchers to interact with respondents freely and elicit a great deal of information. Focus group discussions were held with sixty students registered for a four year diploma in science education. The students were divided into six groups of twelve each. Two hour sessions were held with each focus group. Interviews were held with three respondents at the school administration level namely: the deputy head, the senior woman and the boarding master of a high school in Mashonaland Central. Items used for both instruments were as follows:

1. What is Unhu/Ubuntu?
2. How can Unhu/Ubuntu be detected in a person?
3. Who, in Zimbabwean society could be said to be the overseer/guardian of Unhu/Ubuntu?
4. What is the future of this philosophy/practice in Zimbabwe?
5. What is the link of unhu with citizenship education?

**RESULTS**

**Concept Unhu/Ubuntu**

Responses from four groups that made up the panel discussion groups and the three administrators are not
differing drastically when it comes to what Unhu/Ubuntu is all about.

The panelists emphasized that unhu involves good behaviour, self-composure, acceptable dressing code, decency. The other two groups on the panel stressed the point that it is not one isolated idea but unhu is a complete package which spells out what is acceptable, correct and expected of a human being. In his report, Nziramasanga (1999:69) posits that the concept of Unhu/Ubuntu should be introduced, developed and be the ‘torchlight’ of our moral education’ thus placing emphasis on a complete package. Thus Nziramasanga (1999:61) talks of ‘holistic education’ which is aimed at the development of the whole person: physical, mental, spiritual and social. The ladies in the panel discussion groups and the Teacher in charge were uneasy about the conceptions of Unhu/Ubuntu held by male participants in the focus groups. They felt the concept was gender biased. The ladies argued that some men complain of lack of Unhu/Ubuntu when it suits them and yet derive pleasure when in the company of promiscuous women.

**How can Unhu/Ubuntu be detected in a person?**

Responses from three groups and the three interviewees stressed the point that the correct measurement is found in the complete ‘package’ formula; what the Nziramasanga Commission calls holistic education.

**Overseer / Guardian of Unhu/Ubuntu**

One group was unable to decide on who would be the ultimate arbiter on unhu while other groups came up with responses such as ‘the government, the society and the parents.’

The three administrators said that all government ministries and their affiliated institutions should teach the concept of Unhu/Ubuntu

One of the challenges mentioned by the Nziramasanga Commission (1999:77) is that ‘the nation, the family, the school, the media and churches are...to ensure that the education system produces a person with Unhu/Ubuntu.’

**The Future of Unhu Philosophy**

All respondents expressed the view that unhu/ubuntu is the social and economic base of the future generation in Zimbabwe. They went on to point out that the philosophy brings in dignity, order, and a sense of purpose in people and should be taught in schools and all tertiary institutions. This same view was supported by the interviewees. The five groups from the panel and the three administrators agreed that the greatest threat to unhu/ubuntu is the foreign influence from the West. The West has had a lot of influence on African lifestyles.

Ninety years of colonial rule undermined indigenous culture right down to its marrow. It was pointed out that what the West considered proper and acceptable does not necessarily agree with the African notion of acceptable behaviour. The youth seem to be the victims of foreign influence. One of the administrators warned fellow panelists not to get carried away by the debate on unhu. She accused the panellists of wanting to see toddlers run before they could even walk. She brought in this element of maturity among youngsters.

Her argument was, given time, the youngsters would be guided by what they would have been taught at home, in churches and in schools. The administrator went on to give examples of other countries which went through colonial rule and are still under serious threat from globalisation and yet they have held themselves as Nigerians, Indians, Chinese and Japanese where ever they are. She, however, agreed that the philosophy should be taught at all levels and not be left to one sector of Zimbabwean society. As for the future of civics and citizenship education, the participants observed that the content was relevant if a country was to come up with well-informed citizens. It was pointed out that the success of this course depended on the quality of teachers who will be handling it. The Nziramasanga Commission pointed out that citizenship education can only be worth its salt if it was taught within the Zimbabwean context yet the panel observed that the books which are available are Euro-centric. Mahuku & Mbanje (2012:11), writing in the Herald of 2 June, 2012 reminded Zimbabweans that human rights are ‘socially constructed, have a social life and are inexorably linked to power relations and society’. The three administrators and all groups of student teachers agreed that although citizenship education has already been introduced in teachers’ colleges, polytechnics and few universities like Africa University, Bindura University of Science Education and Chinhoyi University of Technology, the programme still has a long way to go before it is taken seriously by all lecturers and students.

**Link of Unhu with citizenship education**

Finally, the participants argued that merely teaching students about the theory of citizenship is ineffective unless homes, schools, colleges and universities themselves reflect democratic practices by giving students the opportunity to have a say in decision making.

They went on to point out that institutions of learning, by their structure and emphasis on theoretical knowledge are fundamentally incapable instilling in students the commitment and belief in democratic ideals. Yet according to (Shipman) institutions of learning mirror society and thus act as an extension of society by ensuring that societal
values, norms, ideals such as unhu/ubuntu are not only enhanced but perpetuated.

The Nziramasanga Commission would concur with the findings of this research and that is why the commission is advocating that students be allowed to carry out practical projects that deal with governance, helping the marginalised, racism, clean-up campaigns and so on.

CONCLUSION
This paper has established that the teaching of Unhu/Ubuntu and Citizenship education are necessary from zero grade to university. A concerted effort should be made by all stakeholders to ensure that Unhu/Ubuntu is taught formally and informally.

RECOMMENDATION
We recommend that Unhu/Ubuntu and Citizenship Education should be valued in the same way as the English language has been valued and should, therefore be taught from zero grade to University. The present exploratory research provides a useful springboard from which a more comprehensive research may be embarked.

REFERENCES:


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