Ethics, Education and Peace Enhancement in a Post-Conflict Context: The Role of School and Family

Hermenegilde RWANTABAGU
Professor, University of Burundi
Email: hermerwanta@hotmail.com

Abstract

Burundi, like the rest of the Great Lakes region, has been shaken by widespread intercommunal divisions and violent confrontations. It is commonly believed that the troubled history of these societies has been due the lack of a consistent moral dimension in school curricula.

It is this obvious gap that the Catholic Church Moral Education Programme, initiated in 2005, sought to address. The new curriculum takes inspiration from traditional peace enhancing values. The programme is situation-based and lays emphasis on the active-participatory approach, in which learners try to appropriate and apply in their daily lives the moral precepts they learn in the classroom.

In a post-conflict context, it is incumbent upon parents, teachers, the churches and other agencies to erect the pillars of peace by imparting the younger generation not only with knowledge but with the right moral values.

Key Words: Ethics, education, peace, moral, values, school, family, humanity.

Introduction

Within the African context, the post-colonial states, Burundi included, have been characterized by intranational crises and interethnic confrontations. On the one hand, the situation may be explained by the failure by the ruling class to establish democratic institutions and to ensure social and economic justice for all. On the other hand, it is commonly believed that the gradual loss of peace-enhancing moral values has been a major contributing factor.
The present article intends to focus on the issue that the deep intercommunal clashes and divisions that Burundi has gone through are due a crisis of moral values among the elites. The article attempts to highlight further the collapse of ethical values as a vital component and how the contemporary family may join hands with school educators and other educational agencies to enhance moral values and to build the pillars of peace in the minds of the younger generation.

Background to the Burundi political crises

The Quest for power by misguided elites

In the traditional setting, political power rested in a hereditary monarch who ruled the country in collaboration with a corps of wise elders, the Bashingantahe, as representatives from the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic communities (Ntahombaye et al, 1999, p.27). All along the colonial period, executive power at the highest level lay in the hands of Belgian authorities: The achievement of independence in 1962 and the subsequent abolition of the monarchy set the stage for rivalry between the Hutu and Tutsi elites, vying for political leadership and economic privilege.

The inter-communal divisions in Burundi have been exacerbated by the ethnocentric conception of power and the gradual radicalization of the elites. This plunged the country into a succession of intranational clashes, the loss of countless human lives and, as it happened since 1993, to massive displacements of the population as internal or external refugees.

At the cultural level, the colonial experience and the gradual invasion by foreign value systems, have undermined the ethical foundations of Burundian society that guaranteed peace and harmony between individuals as between the various components of the community.

Hence, as L. Kagabo (1994, p.84) has remarked, there has been a “reversal of moral values” whereby such constructive attributes as honesty, solidarity, respect for human rights and reverence for life have lost ground in favour of such destructive ones as injustice, egocentrism, violence and exclusion as a way of life, thus paving the way for lawlessness and destructive behaviour, particularly among the younger generation.

The complex and protracted negotiations between the conflictig parties have resulted in a power sharing agreement and the organization of
democratic elections since 2005. While the completion of the peace process and the integration of former rebel combatants into the national armed forces has, de facto, ended the sound of gunfire in the hills and villages, “the scars of war” have not healed as yet in the hearts and minds of the people.

The implication of this is that the “institutional” peace “that has been achieved remains a fragile and delicate edifice that needs to be strengthened by a well grounded moral and social education programme that takes inspiration from the principles of traditional pedagogy, as it was well emphasized by the 1994 Unesco-sponsored Colloquium on Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi (Unesco, 1994, p.20).

The Erosion of cultural values

In the African content, the process of westernization has gradually eroded the binding power of traditional value systems as well as the social institutions which embodied those norms that shaped youth behaviour and ensured social harmony (Nkeshimana, 2007, p.121).

Commenting on the decline of value consensus due to rapid social change, Cummings at al. (2007) say:

“In times of relative tranquility, there is likely to be a high level of value consistency, but in times of rapid change, this consistency may break down”.

In the case of Burundi, the advent of colonial order with the ethos that it entailed has marginalized and weakened the local language and the cultural heritage that it representend, but also the spiritual convictions of a monotheistic and God-fearing people. In this process, the Bashingantahe Institution, as a body with its immense and pervasive moral authority, was trivialized as an irrelevant anachronism.

On the other hand, the western model of schooling, by giving precedence to the cognitive while neglecting the ethical dimension of education has failed to produce men and women of wisdom, ready to perceive good from evil and to order their conduct accordingly. The process has led to what M. Kayoya calls the dehumanization of man by egoistic inclinations (1971, p.122).
In this respect, the loss of customary virtues such as temperance, decency in speech and social demeanour, selflessness, honesty, solidarity and, above all, the strict respect for human life, has degenerated into such depraved inclinations as alcohol and drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, violence, exclusion and intolerance on the basis of ethnicity, political or religious affiliation. Hence, as it has been stressed by scholars such as D. Nizigiyimana (1999, p.47), the political and social crises, civil wars and other evil tendencies generated by pseudo-modernity and that have been a hallmark of many African countries, Burundi in particular, are above all, crises of moral values.

The challenge of our time is therefore, to seek efficient ways of rehabilitation of humanity through the revitalization of fundamental values. Karl Jaspers has emphasized this by saying:

“in order to overcome the present crisis, the advent of people who can give new moral paradigms to mankind is absolutely necessary”.

For this, as Gail Weldon (2010, p.361) rightly reminds us, “schools and teachers do have a key role to play in preparing young people to become responsible citizens”.

Teaching Moral Values in Burundi

Traditional Approach to Moral Education

In Burundian traditional society, youth education was of paramount importance as an imperative for social integration and the perpetuation of cultural traditions. Hence, the homestead with the backing of the community constituted a “walless school” (Rwantabagu, 203, p.8).

As a Burundian saying goes, “giving birth to a child is easy; what is arduous is educating him”. Parents therefore have always had a high level of awareness about their educational responsibilities. In this respect, care was taken to mould the character of children from a tender age. Indeed, as they say: “Igiti kigororwa kikiri gito”, which means that you can give shape to a tree [or person] when it is still young.

Hence, the child was taught early about essential rules of conduct within his community. He learnt decency of speech and behaviour and respect
for parents and elders. In early adolescence, he learnt that natural impulses had to be curbed in the interest of the community and that a strict code of morality existed to secure this end, especially regarding the relations between the sexes which were regulated by strict rules backed by severe sanctions. Thus, for the growing boy or girl, the moral code was written in his mind and his heart, to become part of thinking and feeling. In Burundi as elsewhere in East Africa, indigenous education put remphasis on “value inculcation and internalization” (Ocitti, 1994, p.44).

To secure this end, parents taught by counsel, proverbs and folktales as by setting a good example (Makarakiza, 1957, p.79), and by adopting virtuous deportment in their family and social interactions. As (Kayoya, 1971, p.41) has testified:

“May father embodies the best human values; “Ubushingantahe”: sincerity, righteousness, Ubumwe which is communicative solidarity, “Ubupfasoni”: or nobility of heart, and Ubuvyeyi or responsible parenthood”.

The method used in indigenous pedagogy was thus based on a strategy of dialogue in which all partners (parents and children) played their respective roles. Hence the personality of young people was slowly and imperceptibly moulded and impregnated with the prevailing social norms and values. Thus, customary education aimed at the acquisition, by youth, of integrated conscience or “Umutima” as the prime factor for achieving “ubuntu” or “humanity” (Rwantabagu, 2012, p.43). The latter was not only internalized but also experienced and practiced in everyday situations through deeds of patriotism, by protecting the weak and the elderly, by abiding by the laws and justice, respecting the rights of everyone and protecting the environment for the benefit of the present and future generations. Indeed, as Metz and Gail (2010, p.275) have noted, Sub-Saharan African morality is essentially relational. In this respect L.S. Senghor has observed:

“Morality in Black Africa is active wisdom. It is not a catechism that is recited. It is a way of living that is realized in and by society and above all, within oneself” (Senghor, 1964, p.16).

Indeed, it could not be otherwise in a context where as A.P. Kaboré (2012, p.29) has emphasized, education aimed at addressing communal needs and aspirations.
In Burundian traditional society, it was believed that education was too important to be left to the sole parents. As the popular saying goes “Umwana si uwumwe” meaning that “a child does not belong to one person” but to the community. Therefore, as J. Kenyatta (1962, p.113) has observed, the community being a “walless school”, each member supplemented the family’s efforts in the upbringing of young people. In the absence of any formal evaluation process, the extended family and the public at large acted as harsh and objective judges and examiners of the behaviour standards attained by the “candidates”. By providing feedback to the parents, the latter had the opportunity to adjust or to reinforce their action in the light of the evaluation outcome.

In the contemporary setting, one of the setbacks in the moral education endeavour has been the decline of parental authority and indeed the “resignation” of the family as an agent of socialization, which task schools alone could not fulfil.

It has therefore become imperative, as Ndimurukundo and Mujawaha (1994, p.8) have emphasized, for the family to assume fully its educational responsibilities by joining hands the school for a more effective action, so as to achieve education for wholeness by transmitting a kind of “Sophia” based both on “knowing” and on “being” (Rwantabagu, 1995, p.9).

Revitalizing the Moral Dimension in Education: Case of the New Human Values Curriculum

In the wake of the deep social crisis, extensive violence and widespread instability that Burundi experienced for over a decade and following Unesco’s dictum that “wars begin in the minds of men and that the defences of peace must be built in the minds and hearts of men” it has proved to imperative to design a moral education programme for schools. The main aim of the latter is to restore ethical standards among the younger generation who have been most affected by the socio-political unrest in the country, both as victims and perpetrators of violence. The adoption of the curriculum was subjected to a wide debate and consultations in which all stakeholders were involved.

The Catholic Church initiated curriculum (BNEC, 2005), which is in process of gradual implementation in all the country’s elementary and high schools as well as in teachers’ colleges, draws inspiration from the principles of customary pedagogy.
The aim of the programme is to realize an “all-round human education” based on the appropriation, by children and youth, of basic moral standards and their integration into their daily life at school, in the family and in the community.

The content of the moral education programme is built around the following themes. Human beings: respect for their rights and their dignity; Living in peace with others; Tolerance and solidarity; Justice and honesty; Responsible sexual behaviour; A Sense of Social responsibility; Protection of the natural environment; Abiding by laws and regulations; and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. These principles are, by and large, inspired by the tenets of traditional education and values such as “Ubutungane” or Justice” and “Ubuntu” or Humanism (Ntabona, 2012, p.81) as well as what Yutaka Tanaka calls “Sapiens Convivendi”, that is a culture of peace, tolerance, sharing and conciliation. With regard to the teaching process in schools and colleges, the proposed pedagogical approach contains the following components.

The objective of moral education lessons being not “to know”, but “to be”, much emphasis is laid on interaction between the teacher and the learners. The latter are encouraged to express themselves about their own experiences and their significance. On the other hand, teachers must ensure that lessons are lively, participatory, and based on local and known realities. For this, teachers are free to select a number of moral values to teach, depending on the perceived needs in the local community. In this perspective, the teacher in consultation with parent representatives chooses and adopts one specific value as the “Value of the Year” that will become a focal point for students as a guide for their behaviour and daily interactions.

Lessons may take place within the walls of the classroom or outside, with occasional visits to hospitals and to homes of destitute elderly people as a sign of compassion and solidarity. Above all, the learners must practice and “live” by what they have learnt following what Hans Jonas calls the “Ethics of Social Responsibility” (Hans Jonas, 1995, p.29).

The methodological implication of this reality is that, instead of being imperative and prescriptive, parents and indeed educators ought to put more emphasis on the “active, participative and constructive” approach. The latter, taking inspiration from the “day’s events analysis” method that was practiced in traditional pedagogy, consists in an intimate and open
exchange between teacher, parents and children on matters concerning behaviour problems experienced or likely to be, by the young ones, and on how to stop or to prevent the evil sequence.

The conviction is common among parents, teachers, education managers as well as among learners that the new moral education programme is a timely and relevant innovation in a context where ethical standards have deteriorated to an alarming extent. One school teacher has indeed remarked that the “catastrophic rate of school girl pregnancies” during the recent years calls for urgent action in terms of spiritual and moral teaching and guidance”.

If no formal evaluation of the new curriculum has been undertaken as yet, one evaluation of a special kind has been realized. This was a nationwide competition among high schools and colleges in the form of theatrical performances highlighting the denunciation of depraved ways and the adoption of positive and constructive ones. In addition, sporting encounters have been staged between youth from former hostile neighbourhoods so as to practice the principles of tolerance and dialogue, as taught in classroom lessons.

Conclusion

In his *Perpetual Peace*, Immanuel Kant (1897, p.25) has remarked that “war is evil because it makes more bad people than it takes away”. In a context like Burundi which has for over a decade experienced deep divisions, and serious moral depravation particularly among the younger generation, it has been necessary to adopt a strong remedy so as to effect change and to rebuild consciences and communities, trying to achieve what Karl Jaspers calls the “rehumanization of humanity”.

The moral education curriculum, initiated by the Catholic Church and widely debated among all stakeholders before its adoption and dissemination, has been hailed as a timely endeavour by teachers as by parents. Its participatory and situation-based approach has aroused interest among the learners as testified by the way they have appropriated the moral values conveyed and by their readiness to abide by them in their daily lives. Indeed, a study conducted by the present writer with colleagues on the perception of traditional and contemporary moral values by Burundian youth has convincingly indicated that the younger
The younger generation is well aware of the significance of those values (Ntahombaye et al., 1996).

The partnership between the Catholic Church, schools, parents and the community at large in the adoption of the programme as well in the follow-up to its implementation may be a source of inspiration for other African societies that have experienced violence, social instability and moral disorientation among the younger generation. In this perspective, moral education should contribute to the genesis of building of a society that is more decent and mindful of the dignity and nobility of man. Indeed, as Emmanuel Levinas (1971, p.283) has emphasized “peace is not the absence of wars or battles, it is internal harmony within the conscience of people. It implies openness, dialogue and fraternity among people in their diversity”. In this respect and in the face of the unstable world of today, W. Derouau has highlighted that the main aim of education should be to produce not only “Homo Sapiens” that is a person who is competent and knowledgeable, but also and mostly “Homo Frater”, that is a “Man or Woman of Humanity” who is ready to live in peace and harmony with his fellow humans in a multicultural world.
References


-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

About the author

Hermenegilde Rwantabagu is a professor of Comparative Education in the University of Burundi. He holds a Masters and a Doctorate in Comparative Education from the University of London Institute of Education. He has previously taught at Teachers’ Colleges in Burundi and at Kenyatta University in Nairobi. His research interests are: Teacher Education, Moral Education and Language in Education in Multilingual African Countries.