

# A nation must now educate the child



**Graham A. Dampier** is a lecturer at the Department of Childhood Education at the University of Johannesburg's Soweto Campus. He completed his PhD in 2011 on the poet William Butler Yeats, but decided to shift disciplines out of a concern with the social seclusion and academic isolation that the study of literature currently entails. He is currently researching the language, mathematical and cognitive development of children in the Foundation Phase as an academic affiliate of UJ's Centre for Education Practice Research.

*My basic premise is that the struggle for democracy in South Africa is not over and that when it comes to education in particular, we need to adopt a radical set of ethical principles to change the system fundamentally.*

In this article, I interrogate the notion of democracy in the post-Apartheid era, and argue that the transition from one system of governance to another does not, in and of itself, end the struggle, or the demand for a more equal, transparent and cohesive society. More work must be done to ensure that pre-democratic ambitions of quality education for all South African children are realised. At the moment, education policies and the repeated impositions of new national curricula give the impression that brash and irresponsible decisions are being made by those charged with caring for education in South Africa.

The basic purpose of this essay is to comment on the continued effort to establish a more equal, transparent and cohesive society, and the concomitant effort to fundamentally alter the course of education in South Africa. Regarding the latter, I turn to the insights of the work by Emmanuel Levinas which offers a system of education, and, for that matter, a society suspended in fracture. Levinas offers a system of ethics which, if adopted widely in society, could result in a more harmonious and integrated society. This system of ethics has a universal appeal, since its basic premise is that taking responsibility for others should instil itself in every individual member of society.

I suggest that government, teachers, adults and society at large should all take responsibility for the education of children in South Africa. We have an ethical obligation to consider the well-being of children before we make any radical changes to the system. Continually changing the curriculum, closing down teacher training colleges, splitting the department of education into the superfluous distinction between basic and higher education, and constant calls for strike action are all overlooking the essential object of education, which is the child who needs to learn, develop and grow.

By adopting a system of ethics that seeks to establish universal accountability toward, and responsibility for, the children of South Africa, we have a better chance of settling peacefully on what is contested ground.

My line of reasoning rests on the idea that, becoming democratic means to continue to struggle for a more equal, transparent and open society. And in becoming more democratic, we are obliged to become more responsible for others. These ideas about democracy refer to an on-going process, and the idea that responsibility for others is intimately tied to this, is applied to education in South Africa. I refer to the system of education as a whole from the most general level of policy making to the most basic level of interaction between the teacher and the pupil.

In my view, changing education in South Africa requires a commitment from all sectors of society to be more responsible for the child's desperate need of having a good experience of education. However, this responsibility should also be extended to all stakeholders in education. The minister of education, directors of school districts, district officials, school principals, teachers, academic staff at universities and other teacher training institutions, staff of NGO's, journalists and parents should all commit to being responsible for the other, which is equivalent to caring for the other. Only when we take responsibility for each other in a caring and meaningful way will we be able to take a step in the right direction.

*... various conflicts where unique dialectical tensions are causing grave despair and human suffering. I think most heavily of the conflict in Gaza, described so vividly in el-Namrouti's article in this issue, but also of Zimbabwe, Burma, North Korea, and many other locations where space and power are contested so violently.*

## The struggle continues

I begin my discussion of post-Apartheid South Africa with a philosophical idea that governed (many would argue still governs) discussions of the development of human history. Hegel's dialectic view of human development posited that through a series of ontological theses and antitheses human society would settle on the ultimate synthesis, or absolute truth, which would reign over all societies as the end of historical and political development<sup>1</sup>. For Hegel the end of history culminates in the prevailing rule of the liberal state<sup>2</sup>. Hegel developed his theory of

history during the Napoleonic wars, and considered Napoleon's victory at Jena in 1806 as an end to European historical progress, since it effectively displaced the monarchical system that prevailed over Germany for centuries.

One could be forgiven for seeing the end of Apartheid as falling in line with this dialectic view of history. It is perhaps not a co-incidence that Francis Fukuyama considered the advent of democracy in Eastern Europe, Russia and South Africa in the 1990s as being evidence for the argument that human progress has a limited, definite end in sight. Fukuyama argues: "Hegel saw rights as ends in themselves, because what truly satisfies human beings is not so much material prosperity as recognition of their status and dignity"<sup>3</sup>. During the 1800s many Western nations were making the often very violent, shift from monarchical rule, with the accompanying restriction of individual and civil rights, to republican democracies which by contrast, emphasised the importance of individual liberties. The fall of communism, colonialism before it and the end of Apartheid resulted in similar social freedoms that have prompted many to consider Hegel's dialectic of history as being confirmed with every new "end".

My thoughts turn though to various conflicts where unique dialectical tensions are causing grave despair and human suffering. I think most heavily of the conflict in Gaza, described so vividly in el-Namrouti's article in this issue, but also of Zimbabwe, Burma, North Korea, and many other locations where space and power are contested so violently. The development of human societies often follows irrational routes that cannot be brought under the dialectic law of Hegel's philosophy of history.

Fukuyama writes that "[w]ith the American and French revolutions, Hegel asserted that history comes to an end because longing that had driven historical process - the struggle for recognition - has now been satisfied in a society characterised by universal and reciprocal recognition"<sup>4</sup>. The ultimate culmination of human activity

manifests as a social system wherein all members of society are free of the master-slave dialectic; equal players in an economy that is left to its own devices and where peace prevails internally. “No other arrangement of human social institutions is better able to satisfy this longing [for reciprocal recognition], and hence no further progressive historical change is possible,” Fukuyama explains<sup>5</sup>.

In South African terms, the end of Apartheid signals the end of the struggle for a democratic, open and equal society. Whilst I see the end of Apartheid as a step in the right direction, I believe the struggle continues in various other areas of our society. The chasm between rich and poor, the discontent of our workforce, the crises in education, widespread state corruption and the efforts to increase state control of civil society need to be addressed if our democracy is to fully mature.

In a sense the end of Apartheid is the beginning of history and of a new historical dialectic for South Africans. To consider the struggle ended, would be to side with Hegel and Fukuyama’s ideas of history and human progress. This would amount to gross social complacency and the resignation of the vanguard of social progress to the annals of history. As far as education in South Africa is concerned, and this is true for various aspects of our society, the historical dialectic continues. There is evidence for this everywhere, the most obvious is the so-called crisis in education and the multiple attempts to better education in South Africa (this ironically includes the various articulations of our national curriculum and, very importantly, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme – or NSFAS).

*Our democratic state is not assured; it is a state that we must continue to struggle and work for. The end of Apartheid signals the beginning of a new struggle.*

## The democracy to come

I reject the view of there being any end to history and of referring to “the struggle” in the past tense. Instead, I view history and social development as existing in a state of perpetual becoming. However, I do consider human development to be coherent and meaningful, in that there appears to be some latent logic behind the very peculiar evolutionary journey of our species. Our democratic state is not assured; it is a state that we must continue to struggle and work for. The end of Apartheid signals the beginning of a new struggle. A struggle for responsibility in the face of the Other that must permeate every fibre of the fabric that holds our society together, however tenuously.

By this logic, the end of Apartheid and Bantu education in 1994 coincided with the inception of a new system of education that must undergo various theses and antitheses that are part of the dialectic before it is possible to settle on a synthesis that stabilises the tensions inherent in the system. Stated differently the post-Apartheid system of education needs to develop internally; but it is essential to steer this development to avoid the various crises it may encounter along the way.

One may take this line of reasoning further and argue that if our democracy and system of education are in a perpetual state of becoming, and if there is no final synthesis, then our picture of the democracy that “we struggled for” and the vision we had of education at the fall of Apartheid are images we see on the horizon. They are always still *to come*. I take this cue from Jacques Derrida who views the revolutions in America and France, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the fall of Apartheid not as signalling the end of the struggle for a more equal, free and just

society – but the very beginning of for it. He argues instead that if democracy is the result of the internal dialectic all sovereign nations are subject to, which entails the inner strife between democratic and autocratic rule, the victory propels society into a perpetual state of *becoming* democratic. Democracy is never established, because it is not the end result of a series of events and it is not the prize won in victory. Democracy is not something we can elect to exist within, even after we have struggled for it.

*This shift will necessarily require deep change in society at large. From the most general level of policy making, planning and implementation, to the most basic interaction between the teacher and the learner, a responsibility for the Other and in the face of the Other, are sorely needed.*

Instead, democracy – the true equality of individuals – is necessarily beyond the limit of human history, as we can never fully realise, achieve or articulate it. The advent of democracy, the event which signals democratic rule, is logically an event that we are always moving toward. The moment of becoming democratic is an event that is always hurtling towards us as we have to undergo further struggles to ensure that our conception of democracy is truly achieved. Of democracy, in the strictest sense, we can only speak in the future tense. Derrida writes<sup>6</sup>:

“... democracy remains *to come*; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain, in each of its future times, *to come*: even when there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present, it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept.”

Democracy is always to come and to refer to a country as being democratic is to describe it as being in the perpetual state of moving towards democracy. In this state: “a call might thus be taken up and take hold: the call for a thinking of the event to come, of the democracy to come, of the reason to come. This call bears every hope, to be sure, although it remains, in itself, without hope. Not hopeless, in despair, but foreign to the teleology, the hopefulness, and the *salut* of salvation”<sup>7</sup>.

## Responsibility to the other and radical social change

In my view, to change education in South Africa fundamentally would require a profound shift in the ethics that govern the system. This shift will necessarily require deep change in society at large. From the most general level of policy making, planning and implementation, to the most basic interaction between the teacher and the learner, a responsibility for the Other and in the face of the Other, are sorely needed.

This system of ethics developed by Levinas calls simply for one to “receive from the Other [which includes whoever one encounters in life] beyond the capacity of the I, which means [...] to be taught”<sup>8</sup>. Or stated differently to converse with the Other, to encounter the Other and to exist in a face-to-face relation with the Other in the most radical sense of interaction, requires the willingness to be taught by the Other: “Teaching is not reducible to maieutics [it is not simply a matter of eliciting new ideas from another more knowledgeable person]; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I can contain”<sup>9</sup>.

In their article Brewer and Harrison (p60) present a model of education that requires a deep sense of responsibility to the Other if it is to work. The model was conceived as a way of making education more affordable without reverting

to government or donor subsidy to ensure that quality teaching and learning take place. This model was developed by citizens who are themselves taking the task of changing education. They are assuming responsibility for the Other – the children of South Africa in need of quality education – by developing a cost-effective model of education that uses computer aided learning to free up time for a teacher to develop and deliver a more personalised lesson. More time means that a teacher is more likely to be encountered by each learner as someone who has something of value to teach, which is likely to be a human experience or understanding of reality, as opposed to the alienating epistemological routine of a standardised curriculum.

As Levinas conceives it, the separated “I” has a limited view of the world in that without the “Other” the “I” would only have knowledge of itself without relation. The “Other” is required to provide the “I” with knowledge of what exists beyond the horizon of the separate “I”. He states that the “relationship with the ‘Other’ as interlocutor, in relation to an *existent* precedes all ontology – it is the ultimate relation in Being. Ontology presupposes metaphysics”<sup>10</sup>. Levinas’s system of ethics repositions the locus of learning and redirects the flow of teaching, which is no longer located in the mind of the child: in this system the teacher will learn from each child, since the “Other” brings more than the “I” can contain. Similarly, teaching is no longer directed at the child from an all-knowing source, but circulates between the teacher and the learner as dialogue.

*In terms of education in South Africa, this would amount to every child currently in the system being elevated to a position of supreme priority, a position that will define every child as being the focal point of all endeavours to improve education in South Africa.*

The face-to-face interaction with another human being, Levinas argues, is the essential relationship to manifest in human reality. This I-Thou relation is a mode of existence “in which the ‘I’ is *for* the other”<sup>11</sup>. The “I” exists to encounter and interact with the “Other”. Lisbeth Lipari writes: “Levinas theorises that the ethical relation originates in the asymmetrical subordination of self to other, wherein the priority of the other always comes first”<sup>12</sup>. What is more, since the “I” would be insular and inert without the “Other” any interaction between them necessarily entails the teaching of the “I” by the “Other” and vice versa. But, in order to be taught, the “I” must recognise the irreducibility of the difference that defines the poles of the I-Thou interaction. The “Other” can never be the same as the “I” and by definition exceeds the limits that define the “I”.

The mere coexistence of the “I” and the “Other” does not lead naturally to a sense of responsibility for the “Other”. Levinas argues that responsibility for “Others” redefines the proximity between members of society and more than likely brings individuals closer in an ethical and metaphysical sense. In terms of education in South Africa, this would amount to every child currently in the system being elevated to a position of supreme priority, a position that will define every child as being the focal point of all endeavours to improve education in South Africa. Responsibility does not arise simply when an individual begins to relate to another. The intention to learn from the “Other” does not presuppose a sense of responsibility for the “Other”. It is instead an extension of the limits that define the “I”. One cannot learn responsibility from the exterior and it is not brought to the “I”<sup>13</sup>:

“The ethical relation to the other person, the proximity, the responsibility for others is not a simple modulation of intentionality; it is the concrete modality in which there is produced a non-indifference of one to the other or of the same

to the *Other*, that is, a relation from the Same to what is *out of all proportion* with the Same, and is, in a sense, not of the “same kind.” The proximity ensured by the responsibility for the other is not the makeshift link between “terms” that cannot coincide, cannot be fused into one because of their difference, but rather the new and proper excellence of sociality.”

We see a profound degree of responsibility being displayed in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme as discussed by Van der Berg in this issue of *Focus*. Van der Berg’s account of the criteria for selection that prevails in the NSFAS endeavour indicates a strong sense of responsibility toward the marginalised sections of the student body. By providing these students with the opportunity to study at university, a faceless institution is altering the conditions in which these many individuals are bound, even ordained by circumstance, to live through. The startling effect of this simple, but necessary, gesture is that, according to Van der Berg, “[d]espite the odds being against them, NSFAS-supported students achieve more than other students do, largely because they are less likely to drop out of university.”

## Conclusion

Even though it is not possible to fix all the problems we face in education with a single brush stroke, I maintain that what we lack is a common set of values and ethics. This lack of social cohesion has resulted in many errors and blunders that collectively constitute what many South Africans are referring to as a crisis in education. My view is that if we can legitimately call this a crisis we have only ourselves to blame. While the government is the obvious target, we cannot allow something as important as education to be located within the ambit of centrally administered power alone. Learning does not only happen within four walls. We can and we must shoulder some of the responsibility for ensuring that our children receive the best education we can collectively deliver. In

fact, we must demand the right to invest our time in changing the situation; that is, we must reclaim a portion of the responsibility of caring for education back from the government. It is time that we raise our children as though this vast land were but a small village.

Gambu (in this issue) describes a society where individuals had a sense of responsibility for others. This society resembles the system of ethics developed by Levinas. In this society a child was raised not by the nuclear family alone, but by society, which is a common motif of many African cultures. She relays her personal experiences of being raised and cared for by her neighbours.

This was a routine experience for many. Now much crime exists in a society that has displaced this once cohesive social system characterised by narrowly defined lines of proximity and relation. One can only assume that a certain tension exists in a society that in the past placed so much value on shared responsibility for others, on the one hand, and the current blatant disregard for the safety, health and wellbeing of others, on the other. This inner tension between accountability and what is abraded disregard for others suggests “the village” is an ideal that needs to be resurrected if we are to arrive at a more cohesive society. The harmony of the village and the moral degeneration of post-Apartheid South Africa (with all its stories of crime, domestic violence and gang rape) are two images I find difficult to reconcile. If responsibility for others was ever practised in townships to any meaningful extent then I am convinced that the practice can be resurrected and re-established in South African society as a whole.

Simply put, the maxim that “it takes a village to raise a child” needs to be expanded to “it takes a township, a city, a nation to educate a child,” or in isiXhosa: “Kuthatha isizwe ukufundisa umtwana.”

## NOTES

- 1 Hegel, 1952
- 2 Fukuyama, 1992: p. xii
- 3 Fukuyama, 1992: p. xviii
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Derrida, 2005: p. 306
- 7 Derrida, 2005a: p. xv
- 8 Levinas, 1969: p. 51
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Levinas, 1969: p. 48
- 11 Levinas, 1993: p. 27
- 12 Lipari, 2012: p. 229
- 13 Levinas, 1993: pp. 45–46

## REFERENCES

- Hegel, G. W. (1952). *The phenomenology of spirit*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Derrida, J. (2005). *The politics of friendship*. London: Verso.
- Derrida, J. (2005a). *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (trans. P. Brault & M. Naas). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The end of history and the last man*. London: Free Press
- Hegel, G. W. (1952). *The phenomenology of spirit*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Lipari, L. 2012. 'Rhetoric's Other: Levinas, Listening, and the Ethical Response'. In: *Philosophy and Rhetoric* Vol. 45:3 (pp227–244).
- Levinas, E. 1969. *Totality and Infinity*. Dordrecht: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E. 1993. *Outside the Subject*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.