

Responding to Uncertainty: Pluralism in and through Education

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The following is an abridged version of a speech delivered on June 20, 2018 at the Oxford Symposium in Comparative and International Education at the University of Oxford, United Kingdom.

In 2007-2008, Kenya had a post-election crisis that resulted in intense ethnic violence. On April 30, 2009, Parliament passed a motion to adopt the nominees of the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC). The mandate of the Commission, on which I served, is to mediate ethnic- and race-related conflicts and promote peaceful and harmonious coexistence in Kenya.

Preventing ethnic violence across Africa remains core to my work. Ten years since Kenya set up the NCIC, we have had gains and reversals in the search for national cohesion. Kenya still faces major challenges. Citizenship in particular continues to be eclipsed by competitive electoral politics mobilized around ethnic groups, inter-communal tensions, and the rise of ethnic and racial identities.

At the NCIC, we told educators that they would succeed in promoting pluralism by fostering national identity over ethnic identity. At the same time, they could help culturally diverse learners develop their self-esteem and identities by increasing their awareness of their own cultural, linguistic, and historical heritage. The Global Centre for Pluralism has simplified all that by defining pluralism as an ethic of respect for human differences.

What today is the role of the educator in shaping a cohesive society that is at once plural and cosmopolitan, prosperous and inclusive, fair and responsible?

This is the question posed by the organizers of the Oxford Symposium on Comparative and International Education. I am reminded of the words of Katerina Tomasevki, the first UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education. “Education can be a means to retain as well as to eliminate inequality. As it can serve two mutually contradictory purposes, two opposite results may ensue.” She was talking about the role of education in apartheid.

Claude Ake, in his seminal paper “What is the problem of ethnicity in Africa”, speaks of our ability as Africans “to restrict the pluralist basis of democracy to political pluralism and denigrate social pluralism”. The Kenyan state and many others in this age of uncertainty seem to stand on the verge of a transition to national cohesion that is yet to be fully defined. I am often struck by how the themes of inequalities, inequities, and ethnic violence walk hand in hand. Conversely, there is an absence of education material on how to address these themes in the many African countries where I have worked.

The organizing principle behind my teaching manual, [*Beyond Ethnicism: Exploring Ethnic and Racial Diversity for Educators*](#), is that the diversity of Kenya’s ethnicities, races, languages, cultures, and religions should not be a pretext for conflict but a source of identity for Kenya.

While I believe the education sector is crucial in building the relationships needed to address ethnic conflict, the sector cannot do it alone. In divided societies, peace is political and so is pluralism. It takes both political leaders and educators to unwind the harmful dynamics of competitive ethnicism and build towards peaceful pluralism. We need leaders with the greatest levels of influence to deal with the structural roots of ethnicism and implement ethnic and racial equity plans. They must also provide legitimacy to the education sector in its efforts to promote pluralistic societies and deal with ethnic differences that lead to violence.

Here is a short list of key ways in which educators can play a constructive role.

- 1) **Educators need a shared understanding of pluralism, and skills in navigating meaningful dialogue on ethnic divisions.** Teachers are traditionally seen as the holders of knowledge and learners as the receptacles. However, teachers usually come from the same society as their learners and share their cultural biases. Many are reluctant to challenge existing prejudices and fear.

Teachers need to begin with a shared understanding of pluralism and enough data to defend what they say. A skilled teacher would then be able to use facts to explain the root causes of a particular ethnic conflict and how a pluralistic approach could help solve it.

- 2) **Teaching pluralistic practice demands infusing daily lessons into incremental, habit-forming activities.** It also needs to be tested alongside other subjects, not integrated or mainstreamed, so as to measure learning outcomes.
- 3) **We need to learn from success stories about sustaining stable and pluralistic societies.** For instance, why is there little violence between ethnic communities in Ghana and Tanzania?
- 4) **We need to start teaching pluralism to young children at an early age,** before the outside world shapes their understandings of “we” versus “others”.
- 5) **Learners need to see themselves among educators, and in their learning material.** This means we need teachers from several ethnic communities in our schools, and we need history textbooks that tell the story of every ethnic and racial group.
- 6) **We need to understand how individual learners grasp pluralism to achieve sustained change.** The educational institutions I have worked with tend to focus on long-term institutional outcomes. But learners who hold strong ethnic or racial biases are often confident and can be great influencers. Their fellow learners, family, and friends listen to them. When such learners come to understand pluralism, they can interrupt other learners’ prejudicial statements. They can draw others into programs to increase their knowledge and skills.
- 7) **Educators with a new understanding of pluralism need time to integrate this knowledge.** Educators may receive training in pluralism but they return to unchanged communities. Training in pluralism needs to include institutional and peer support that could lead to changes in behaviour and attitudes.
- 8) **We need ways to assess whether educational institutions have the capacity to promote pluralism.** Signs of progress include: changed policies, invitations to people from different

ethnic groups to speak at or participate in school activities, teachers' willingness to speak up in support of pluralism and against inequity, and new opportunities for staff to build knowledge and skills in pluralism.

In conclusion, it took the 2007 post-election violence for the NCIC Law to be put in place. Implementation has proven difficult but Kenya was the first African nation that attempted to deal with ethnic relations through legislation.

I have found that the most consistent leaders in changing mindsets and working towards pluralistic solutions are the men and women of the teaching profession. The educators I work with in conflict zones give me new insights about the possibilities to engage ethnic and racially-mixed groups in productive dialogue. Teachers are respected. People seek them out for opinions. Many want to contribute to solutions but do not know how. They want to embed pluralism in existing values and build new attitudes. Let's build a generation of teachers who will respond to the uncertainties of this world by creating an ethic of respect for human differences. This is pluralism.