



CONFERENCE PAPER

Religion Education and Critical Education: The Case of Barnato Park High School in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a case of a South African public school, Barnato Park High, to reflect on if there is a space for religion education and, more specifically, a critical pedagogical approach to teaching the subject at a school that promotes a Christian ethos. I will first define the concepts of critical education and religion education in South Africa, and then move onto providing a brief historical background of the school. The paper will reveal that with the school promoting a Christian character, it may be challenging for it to create an open and inclusive educational environment that exposes learners to religious diversity.

KEYWORDS

religion education, critical education, Christian ethos, learners, Barnato Park High School

Introduction

The question on if there is a space for religion education and, more specifically, a critical pedagogical approach to teaching the subject in a public school that promotes a religious character is important to reflect on considering the current context of a post-apartheid South African government that aims to build an open and inclusive diverse nation. Before this paper will use the case of a South African public school, Barnato Park High, to grapple with this question, it will first define the concepts of critical education and religion education in South Africa, and then move onto providing a brief historical background of the school. The paper will

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show that with the school promoting a Christian ethos, it may be confronted with the challenge of creating an open and inclusive educational environment in teaching and learning about diverse religions that constitute South Africa and the world.

Defining Critical Education and Religion Education

It is important to understand that there is no single definition of critical education. In other words, critical education is a contested term that is constructed in different ways, at different times and in different places. As such, it has been discussed at length by scholars and educators such as Paolo Freire, Henry Giroux, Ivan Illich, Bell Hooks, Michael Apple, and Peter McLaren. Nevertheless, CAMINA (n.d.) provides a valuable definition of critical education by describing it as “striving towards *transformation*: challenging existing social structures and helping us to build greater equality, social justice, environmental sustainability and collective capacity”. Here, critical education can be understood as inspiring an attitude of social change from the grassroots level. This means creating safe and supportive schools that encourage learners to develop critical thinking in order to be critically engaged citizens (Griffin, Brown & Warren 2012, p. 160).

However, it is important to note that critical education has its own challenges. While it aims to accommodate diversity, such as religion, race and culture, it seems to not address the ways in which educators can think about how to grapple with, for example, the existence of non-cooperative, difficult or one-sided school code of conducts or constitutions. Critical education also places more emphasis on negotiation than on implementation, which can be problematic in addressing the existence of traditional, non-progressive school leadership and management. This context makes it very challenging for the practice of critical education to take place (Portelli, 1994). In view of some of these challenges, critical education should be regarded as a valuable pedagogical approach to countries like South Africa that promote the spirit of working together between individuals from different socio-economic and political backgrounds.

It is, therefore, possible to infer that critical education formed part of the process of the post-apartheid South African government’s re-evaluation of the meaning of education in general, and Religion Education in particular. As such, with the National Policy on Religion and Education adopted in 2003, the government defined Religion Education (RE) as a non-confessional educational programme for teaching and learning about religious diversity (par. 19). RE was also identified as a subject that aims to cultivate democratic and critically engaged citizens. With critical education and religion education defined, we can now turn to exploring the historical background of Barnato Park High School.

A Brief History of Barnato Park High School

Barnato Park High School is a co-educational public school located in Berea, Johannesburg, South Africa. It was first a 1897 stone mansion that was built for the

British diamond and gold mining entrepreneur Barney Barnato (Barnato Park High School, n.d.). However, the construction of it was only completed after Barnato's death under the supervision of his nephew Solly Joel. During the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), the establishment was used as a British Officers' convalescent home (Barnato Park High School, n.d.). Joel later donated the mansion and its grounds to the Transvaal Department of Education (of the then Government of the Union of South Africa) for a girls' school that was named Johannesburg High School for Girls. After being opened for 102 years, unfortunately the school was condemned, and finally closed in December 1989 (Barnato Park High School, n.d.). Yet in January 1990, Barnato Park High School opened as a co-educational school that welcomed learners and staff members from various racial backgrounds in an attempt to fight against the apartheid (education) system (Barnato Park High School, n.d.). Gradually, the school became a multicultural environment.

Post-Apartheid Barnato Park High School

When South Africa abolished the apartheid regime and became a democratic country in 1994, the government no longer promoted a state religion. As shown in the religion and education policy (2003, par. 1), the post-apartheid government demanded public schools to teach about religious diversity, and not to nurture a single religious ethos like the apartheid regime had enforced. However, this is not the case with Barnato Park High since it promotes a Christian ethos. As a deputy principal of this school, I noticed that this was particularly shown in the following Christian prayer that is said at school assemblies,

Dear God,

We open the doors wide of our school and invite you in. Please be in our lessons and help us to concentrate and learn. Fill us with happiness as we discover more about the world. Guide our creativity to express ourselves in the process of learning and teaching. Help us to share, care for and love one another.

Fill us with spirit of respect as we interact with each other. Watch over us and protect us as we run and play within our school premises. Come and be a part of everything we do today and beyond. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Although Barnato Park High has a multicultural environment, the example of this prayer suggests that the school is not as inclusive when it comes to recognising and observing religions other than Christianity. Yet, as a way to address this challenge, the school is interested in introducing RE to the curriculum, especially considering that Life Orientation plays a minimal role in teaching learners about religious diversity. This raises the question on if there is a space for RE and, more specifically, a critical pedagogical approach to teaching the subject in this school that promotes a Christian ethos. However, with Barnato Park High still in the process of researching how to introduce RE in a school that promotes a single religion, this can point to an early

indication of the school attempting to create a space to expose learners to other religions. This can, therefore, be viewed as the school recognising the value of inclusivity and the role RE can play in nurturing this.

Conclusion

This paper looked at the case of Barnato Park High School to reflect on the question if there is a space for a critical pedagogical approach to teaching Religion Education at a school that promotes a Christian ethos. It discussed that critical education and religion education both aim to nurture learners to be critically engaged citizens. However, with the example of Christian prayers forming an integral part of school assemblies, this indicated that Barnato Park High was promoting a Christian ethos. This suggests an issue in the school creating an open and inclusive environment for teaching and learning about religious diversity that constitute South Africa and the world. Yet, the school's interest in adding RE to the curriculum can be regarded as it recognising that the subject can play a valuable role in creating an inclusive, multicultural and multi-religious teaching and learning environment.

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