



CONFERENCE PAPER

Inter-Religious Cooperation and its Challenges in Schools and Public Life in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

After the collapse of apartheid, South Africa adopted a new political regime in 1994 that promoted democratic values to build a socially cohesive nation out of a fractured past. The post-apartheid state changed its education policies to reflect this democratic framework that recognised, appreciated, and accommodated the diverse reality of the country's population. More specifically, Religion Education was incorporated into the school curriculum that focussed on teaching and learning about "religion, religions, and religious diversity" (Chidester, 2003, p. 262). Religion Studies was a specialised subject for senior learners that formed part of the Religion Education curriculum. This paper will explore how the post-apartheid South African education policies recognise the value of Religion Studies and its role in creating inter-religious cooperation in the country's schools and communities. I will explain the South African Schools Act and National Policy of Religion and Education as two key education policies that underpin the subject Religion Studies. However, while Religion Studies will be shown as aiming to build inter-religious cooperation, I will discuss that this is a challenging process considering that a strong Christian ethos is still promoted by some public schools in the country. I argue that Religion Studies has a transformative role in the South African classroom since it promotes the importance of values in transforming (inter-religious) relationships within schools and outside of them.

KEYWORDS

inter-religious cooperation, policies, post-apartheid, social cohesion, diversity

Introduction

Under the apartheid regime, South African schools and communities were segregated along various signs of differences, including race and religion. With the apartheid government declaring Christianity as the state religion, it ensured that the education system promoted an Afrikaner Calvinist Christian national ethos in the country's schools. This means that regardless of their own religious or non-religious orientations, learners and teachers were obligated to study no other religions other than Christianity. As a result, many South Africans knew very little about other religions. In addition to the lack of knowledge of various religions, the interaction between religious communities was minimal. Both, therefore, contributed towards viewing religions other than Christianity with suspicion and being stereotyped. African Traditional Religion is one example of a religion that many South Africans viewed as paganism, and was in fact not even regarded as a religion, but denounced as a cultural practice.

After the end of apartheid, South Africa adopted a new political regime in 1994 that promoted democratic values to build a socially cohesive nation out of a fractured past. The post-apartheid state changed its education policies to reflect this democratic framework that recognised, appreciated, and accommodated the diverse reality of the country's population. More specifically, Religion Education was incorporated into the school curriculum that focussed on teaching and learning about "religion, religions, and religious diversity" (Chidester, 2003, p. 262). Religion Studies was a specialised subject for senior learners that formed part of the Religion Education curriculum. It was introduced in 2008, and offered as an elective subject to learners in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase (Grades 10–12). It should be noted that in 2015, the subject was also offered to adults (older than 21 years of age) who wanted to complete Grade 12.

This paper will explore how the post-apartheid South African education policies recognise the value of Religion Studies and its role in creating inter-religious cooperation in the country's schools and communities. It will explain the South African Schools Act and National Policy of Religion and Education as two key education policies that underpin the subject Religion Studies. However, while Religion Studies will be shown as aiming to build inter-religious cooperation, I will discuss that this is a challenging process considering that a strong Christian ethos is still promoted by some public schools. I argue that Religion Studies has a transformative role in the South African classroom since it promotes the importance of values in transforming (inter-religious) relationships within schools and outside of them.

Understanding Key Policies

It is important to understand the South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) and the 2003 National Policy of Religion and Education as two key education policies that underpin the subject Religion Studies. Both policies promote the constitutional freedom of conscience and religion at public schools. The South African Schools

Act stipulates that provisions for religious observances can be made at public schools on the condition that attendance by learners and staff members are free and voluntary. The National Policy on Religion and Education promotes the teaching and learning of various religions in South Africa and the world. The national policy introduces Religion Education as an educational programme that aims to mould learners into democratic citizens who recognise, understand, appreciate, and engage with different religious beliefs and practices (par. 18, 19). It stipulates that Religion Education is different from Religious Instruction as the former is a non-confessional approach to studying religions and is the responsibility of the school, whereas the latter takes on a confessional approach to teaching a particular religion and is the “responsibility of the home, the family and the religious community” (par. 19, 55). This means that Religion Education neither promotes nor undermines any religion. Instead, it teaches about diverse religions as a social phenomenon, including “the common values that all religions promote, such as the human search for meaning and the ethic of service to others” (par. 18). Religion Education also aims at promoting the “[c]onstitutional values of citizenship, human rights, equality, freedom from discrimination, and freedom for conscience, religion, thought, belief, and opinion” that encourages learners to be participating citizens in an open, inclusive and democratic nation (par. 11). One may, therefore, conclude that Religion Education, including Religion Studies, can be regarded as playing a vital and transformative role in promoting the importance of values of dignity and respect, which can contribute towards creating a space for inter-religious cooperation to take place in a diverse nation like South Africa.

Interreligious Cooperation and its Challenges

Indeed, the South African Schools Act and National Policy on Religion and Education ensures that public schools establish an open and inclusive environment that nurtures inter-religious cooperation amongst learners and teachers. Some schools, for example, make provisions for teachers to take two days of leave per year for religious observances. Another example is that learners who are African Traditional Religion practitioners are permitted to observe initiation ceremonies during the school year.

While the role of Religion Studies is transformative as it aims to build inter-religious cooperation, this is a challenging process considering that a strong Christian ethos is still promoted by some public schools. In rural and township areas, for instance, Christian prayers in public school assemblies are still carried out. Interestingly, Christian prayers are also part of state official District and Provincial functions. Nevertheless, teaching about religious diversity in rural and township schools can be quite challenging given that many individuals had little to no social interaction with persons of other faiths. The example of the 2017 “OGOD” court case also points to the challenging process of building inter-religious cooperation in schools. The *Organisasie vir Godsdienste-Onderrig en Demokrasie* [Organisation for Religious Education and Democracy] (OGOD) is an association that addresses constitutional violations of religion and public schools, and brought a case against

six public schools in Gauteng and the Western Cape that promoted a Christian ethos (Schools should not adopt one religion, 2017). The organisation stated that with these schools promoting only one religion and requiring learners to reveal their adherence to a specific religion, they were in breach of the National Policy on Religion and Education. The presiding Judge Willem van der Linde handed down his ruling that public schools cannot promote one religion, which was a victory for the organisation.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the post-apartheid South African education policies as recognising the value of Religion Studies and its role in creating inter-religious cooperation in the country's schools. The introduction of Religion Studies is a step in the right direction since it aims to build a socially cohesive society that respects and tolerates religious and cultural diversity. This shows that Religion Studies has a transformative role in the South African classroom since it promotes the importance of values in transforming (inter-religious) relationships within schools and outside of them. Yet, while Religion Studies plays an integral role in building religious cooperation, there are still certain challenges, such as public schools promoting a Christian character, that disrupt this process of collaboration. Despite national government adopting policies to create a united nation, proper implementation of them still needs to take place at provincial, district and municipal levels.

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