

Teaching and Learning about Religions in Schools: Responses From a Participation Action Research Project

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Abstract

This article presents the results of an analysis of data obtained from a participation action research project conducted with the co-operation of selected teachers in three regions in South Africa. The research project is entitled *Facilitating strategies of belief and value orientations in a multicultural education system* (2001 & 2002). The participating teachers were guided by the researchers to develop and reflect upon the introduction of innovative strategies pertaining to teaching and learning about religions and values in a multicultural society in their own particular educational contexts. The research project was conducted in two phases. During the first phase (2001) the theoretical underpinnings relating to the research project were defined and the preparation of in-service teachers for their participation in the project was undertaken (cf. Ferguson & Roux 2003). In the second phase (2002) a further cycle of participation was undertaken based upon the reflections of the respondents on their facilitation strategies during class interventions, documented in journals. Examples of teaching strategies are presented as well as recommendations for in-service teacher training in the domain of religion education.

Introduction

The commencement of the project *Facilitating strategies of belief and value orientations in a multicultural education system* in 2001 was, in retrospect a timely initiative from the three South African tertiary institutions involved. In the light of the introduction of the new National Policy on Religion in Education (September 2003), the project presents significant insights regarding the various levels of religious literacy amongst a sample of South African educators as well as examples of appropriate pedagogy by which the principles outlined in the National Policy may be implemented in schools

The project upon which this article is based commenced in January 2001 and was completed in two phases: in 2001 (February – November) and 2002 (January – October). The main reason for undertaking this project initially was to respond to the inclusion of religions, beliefs and values in the curriculum as emphasised in various policy documents, such as Curriculum 2005 (1997), the Revised National Curriculum Statement (2001), and the National Curriculum Statement (2002) (cf. Ferguson & Roux 2003 for a detailed discussion).

The aim of this article is to present an analysis of the reflections of the participating teachers on their strategies for teaching and learning about religions as experienced during the two stages of the research project. Reflections on learner-responses to such teaching and learning strategies will also be presented. As this is a second article on the project, the research design and methodology will be referred to only briefly. This article is qualitative in essence as the researchers were concerned with analysing and interpreting data obtained from the journals completed by participating teachers during the two phases of the project and from semi-structured interviews conducted at the end of the second phase of the project. The results of this project should inform both pre- and in-service teacher training regarding the successful inclusion of religion education in the school curriculum and attitudes towards religious diversity in developing a school ethos.

The Research Project¹

The central aim of this project was to provide the tools whereby teachers would be able to cope with religious diversity, beliefs and values in the curriculum, particularly in Life Orientation programmes. In addition, through participation action research, the researchers were keen to assist teachers to develop innovative strategies to facilitate learning around content associated with religions and value orientations. In order to be representative of different educational environments in higher education, the research team consisted of five lecturers and researchers in Didactics (Curriculum Studies) and Religious Studies at the University of Stellenbosch, the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Transkei and the Peninsula Technikon in Cape Town (Wellington Campus) (cf. Ferguson & Roux 2002; Ferguson & Roux 2003: 273-275).

The research design was ethnographic and qualitative in nature (cf. McCutcheon 1999, Hammersley 1990:1-3; 25). Participation action research as a research methodology was introduced to allow the participating teachers to reflect on their own progress when handling content associated with various religions. The basis of the research methodology was a combination of two types of action, viz. the participation of the teachers and their reflections on their newly acquired knowledge and skills, alongside the experiential reflective learning of their learners (Kolb 1984 in Moon 1999). The research team introduced the participating educators to the significance of ethnography in relation to their own practice as an application of the Warwick interpretive approach (cf. Jackson 1997). The educators were guided towards taking diverse interpretations within religions into account as represented amongst the learners in their particular classes.

The first phase of the project focussed mainly on the preparation of teachers for their participation in the project through in-service training workshops. The teachers were exposed to content on religions and beliefs as well as the theoretical notions of participation action research. First phase journals (explained in more detail further along) were introduced for teachers to complete after each contact session with their respective classes. These journals provided valuable information regarding the level of the teachers' knowledge and the teaching strategies implemented in classroom contact sessions (cf. Ferguson & Roux 2003: 273-275).

In the second phase (2002), follow-up workshops and discussion groups were held with the participating teachers to assess what they had been able to accomplish during the first phase. Teachers had to evaluate successes and problem areas as identified in the first journals and to discuss the teaching and learning strategies devised and implemented in their contact sessions. A second journal was introduced for the second phase. The workshops, interviews and journals were carefully planned to encourage educators to continue to participate in the research project and to request assistance when it was required. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with participating teachers to verify comments made in the first and second journals and to allow them to express their opinions on their involvement in the project (cf. Ferguson & Roux 2003). These interviews were recorded and transcribed by a research assistant to ensure accuracy.²

Selection of Teachers and Schools

As was indicated in a previous article (cf. Ferguson & Roux 2003: 273-275), three regions were targeted in South Africa: Gauteng, the Western Cape and the Eastern Cape. Given South Africa's broad spectrum of language and religion, as well as demographic differences, the three regions were targeted to include very dissimilar schools. The schools were randomly chosen by the researchers in areas

known to them where religious diversity is a feature. The schools are located in different economic and cultural environments and representative of at least three language groupings (Afrikaans, English and Xhosa). Of the fifteen participating teachers, two teachers were Foundation Phase while the other eleven were Intermediate Phase.

The five schools selected were as follows:

- Two English-medium schools and seven teachers in Gauteng. The learners are representative of at least four different religions practised in South Africa. Both schools are situated in urban areas and are economically middle class.
- Three schools and six teachers in the Western Cape. Two of the schools are Afrikaans-medium, with learners from mainly Christian and Muslim backgrounds. These schools are also economically middle class. The other school comprises mainly Xhosa-speaking learners and teachers from Independent Christian Churches (ICC) and African religions (ARs). These schools are largely economically deprived.
- Two schools and two teachers in the Eastern Cape. These are rural schools, economically deprived and the teachers and learners only Xhosa-speaking. Learners are from African traditional and Independent Christian Church (ICC) backgrounds.

Qualitative Questionnaire

A pilot questionnaire was administered to five teachers randomly in order to test for clarity of expression and the validity of the questions in the questionnaire. The first in a series of workshops was launched with the final form of this questionnaire to gather data regarding the teachers' perceptions, intrinsic knowledge and views regarding different religions as well as the religious orientations of the participating teachers. Twenty teachers answered this questionnaire, five from Gauteng, nine from the Eastern Cape (Transkei area), two from Wellington, and four from Stellenbosch.

The first section of the questionnaire was designed to gather biographical information about the teachers as well as information about the religious composition of their schools. The nine Eastern Cape teachers attended a project workshop where they were exposed to the content of the project, but only two would eventually participate on the grounds that participation would mean additional work for them. The number of Gauteng teachers increased from five to seven, because of the general interest amongst the teachers regarding the focus on diverse religions. Two of the Western Cape teachers (Foundation Phase) did not take part in the second phase of the project due to personal circumstances. The final number of teachers who would participate in the second phase of the project (2002) was thirteen.

The five schools involved in this project had a predominantly Christian composition, with approximately 20 % of the learners representing a variety of other religions, such as Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hinduism and African religions. Fifty percent (10:N=20) of the participating teachers were under the age of 40 at the time the questionnaire was administered. Almost all were well qualified with qualifications ranging from BA degrees to Higher Diplomas in Education. Only 35% (7:N=20) indicated their training in religion, however all of them had been trained in Bible education and not religion studies.

The second section of the questionnaire included questions on teacher attitudes towards the place of religions, beliefs and values in the school curriculum (Life Orientation). The analysis of the qualitative data provided some indication of teacher attitudes towards the inclusion of information on religions in the school curriculum. Responses to selected questions have been summarised below:

- **Do you think that beliefs, religions and values have a place in the school curriculum? Give reasons for your answer.**

Of the fourteen (N=20) responses, only one teacher felt that religions, beliefs and values do not have a place in the school curriculum. The other teachers indicated that religion education has a very important function in terms of creating tolerance and awareness towards others.

- **How do you feel about facilitating/teaching material on religions and values in the school curriculum? Give reasons for your answer.**

Of the fourteen (N=20) teachers who responded to this question, only one responded negatively towards the idea of facilitating/teaching material on different religions and values. The rest were very positive towards including such material in their lessons.

- **Do you accommodate learners from different belief systems in your classes?**

All the teachers (N=20) indicated that they do accommodate learners from different belief systems in their classes, but did not explain how this is done.

- **Do you believe that you have a responsibility towards learners from all religious and cultural backgrounds in your classes? Motivate your answer.**

Only thirteen (N=20) teachers responded to this question, but they all felt that they do have a responsibility towards learners from all religious and cultural backgrounds. They indicated that there was a need to be more understanding and aware of everyday situations in the lives of their learners.

The third section included questions to determine the extent of the teachers' knowledge about six principal religions practised in South Africa. All the teachers (20:N=20) indicated that they were knowledgeable about Christianity, but had very little knowledge of the other religions mentioned in the questionnaire. However, almost all were willing to broaden their knowledge and understanding

of religions in general or felt that it was important to do so. Only one teacher responded negatively towards learning about religions other than Christianity. Seven teachers (35%) (N=20) indicated that the knowledge they did have of various religions had been acquired mainly through reading and education, viz. courses completed as part of a degree or higher diploma. In some cases knowledge of religions had been acquired through direct experience of diversity in communities and in South African society in general.

During the first workshop, discussion sessions allowed the participating teachers to share with other participants their personal positions in relation to religiously diverse classes and levels of self-confidence in handling materials on different religions. The teachers also shared their fears, prejudices and biases in presenting content about religions other than their own. For many of the teachers, the fears or prejudices were associated with misconceptions of beliefs, such as God concepts in Hinduism or the figure of the diviner in African religions.

It was thus clear from the qualitative data obtained from the questionnaire and the discussions held during the first workshop that the participants required information on different religions to facilitate teaching and learning about religions in schools. It is for this reason that time was devoted to a study of some main beliefs, practices and values of six religions practised in South Africa during the second, third and fourth workshops.

Workshops

The selected teachers had never before been involved in research programmes relating to religions, beliefs or values. Four workshops, during the first year (2001) of the project were organized in each region to assist the participants in gaining knowledge on religions, beliefs and the theory behind participation action research. During the workshops the teachers discussed suitable teaching and learning strategies in relation to their particular school environments. A manual compiled by the researchers, covering six religions was presented to the teachers to assist them with basic information, as well as a series of posters and games. In all the participating schools, teachers and learners at first found it difficult to locate resource materials, a situation that could hinder progress. At one school in particular, the teacher guided the learners towards solving this problem for themselves. Learners discovered that the information could be found in reference books, in the library and on the Internet. The teachers in the rural areas however, were unsure as to the types of resources that could be used. They were inclined to use only the visual materials supplied by the researchers to prompt class discussions.

During the workshops the teachers were given the opportunity to identify teaching strategies that would enable them to adopt a facilitative role in the presentation of information on religions, beliefs and values. The researchers pro-

vided some ideas such as discussions around the value of sacred objects for adherents of religions, interpreting religious symbols and setting up rotating research stations and games whereby learners would discover interesting information for themselves. Facilitation strategies were not discussed in detail since the researchers wanted to encourage teachers to create their own. Previous research initiatives were re-introduced on for example the system of *colour-coding* religions, whereby teachers used specific colours to represent each of the religions studied for example blue for Judaism, purple for Christianity, orange for Buddhism (Roux & Steenkamp, 1995; Roux, 2003). All posters, games and any information or any other visual materials were designed in the assigned colours. Learners could then associate the information about a religion with the specific colour.

The focus of the first, second and third workshops was on the study of main religions, beliefs, practices and values associated with six religions practised in South Africa, viz. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and African religions. The connections between religious beliefs and values were explored as well as mutual values across religious traditions, but which were also consistent with living in a pluralistic democracy (*Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy*, Department of Education, 2001, 44-45).

In the fourth workshop the teachers were introduced to the theory of participation action research. Ethnography as a concept was introduced in relation to the religious, cultural and economic diversities of the teachers and also of their learners. It was at this point that the teachers were introduced to the journals in which they would record and reflect upon each session in the classroom. Teachers would record their initiatives, creativities, successes, shortcomings, learner-responses and attitudes. If necessary, responses from parents to both the teacher and the content handled during their interactions with the learners would also be requested. The importance of the teachers and learners' reflections were discussed in detail since it was of the utmost importance that the participants understood their role and reflection as participants in the research project.

At the beginning of the second phase (2002) an additional workshop in each region was held. Problems and successes identified in the first journals (collected in October 2001) were discussed. The style and format of the journals were changed in collaboration with the participants to allow for more adequate comments in the second phase journals. It was however essential to analyse the second phase journals (collected in August 2002) in relation to the qualitative interviews conducted earlier in April/ May 2002. The reason was that teachers could then clarify points made in their journals for the researchers. As has been noted, the interviews conducted in April/May 2002 were individual and semi-structured. Triangulation for the trustworthiness of the data was therefore also accomplished as described in the project proposal (cf. Ferguson & Roux 2003)

An Analysis of Qualitative Data Pertaining to Teaching and Learning Strategies used by Participating Teachers

The central focus of the project was to encourage creative participation amongst the teachers. An analysis of the transcripts of the qualitative interviews and the journal entries revealed a range of responses, perceptions and levels of participation from amongst the teachers.

The following examples extracted from the journals are examples of facilitation strategies, whereby participation, creativity and skills development would be encouraged amongst the learners. Comments and responses on the nature and level of participation from the learners have therefore also been included. These examples reflect a combination of strategies from both phases of the project (2001 and 2002).

Regarding approach, two of the teachers (Grade 4) tended to work from a moral/ethical perspective towards factual content, while the other eleven teachers preferred working from more explicit factual content towards moral/ethical or values-related issues.

- **Visits to places of worship** (a church and a mosque): one of the Gauteng schools utilised places of worship in the vicinity of the school. Learners were required to do pen sketches during visits to the religious buildings and on returning to school, to complete their sketches in watercolours. The visit to the mosque resulted in an unexpected tour of the interior of the mosque, an experience to which the learners responded with great delight. Thereafter, Muslim learners were given the opportunity to explain symbols identified in the mosque to their peers.
- **“Show `n tell”**: using religious artefacts or sacred objects whereby learners were required to explain the significance of various artefacts to their peers. Learners were then required to draw an artefact with a description of its worth and value for believers or adherents of the particular religion (Gauteng and Western Cape).
- **Group investigation activities (Grades 4,6,7)**: in which the learners designed and presented posters on beliefs, practices, rituals, symbols, dress, places of worship and sacred functionaries of the major religions practised in South Africa (Gauteng and Western Cape).
- **Discussion groups (Grades 4,6,7)**: learners engaged in group discussions around topics introduced by their teachers. It was interesting to note how discussions on particular religious content led to discussions on a range of other values-related issues, such as stereotyping and the tendency of people to misconstrue certain religious beliefs or practices. Learners responded positively to ideas on the universality of *love* and *compassion*, and *tolerance* towards religious and cultural diversity. Learners were encouraged to ask questions about the religious practices, rituals and traditions of their peers (Gauteng and Western Cape).

- **Group investigation activities (Grade 4):** learners worked in groups on a topic entitled *Rules and values*. Teachers introduced content using cartoon pictures. Both whole-class and group feedback sessions took place (Gauteng).
- **Role-play and interpreting cartoon pictures (Grade 4):** strategies included role-play around moral issues such as *You must not kill*. Learners were required to interpret cartoon pictures depicting the theme. These activities resulted in whole-class and group discussions. Discussions with parents on the topic were also encouraged. (Gauteng).
- **Greetings:** learners were introduced to greetings in different cultures and religions. The teachers mentioned that the lesson resulted in much excitement and positive interaction between learners themselves and between learners and their teachers as they used specific greetings (Gauteng and Western Cape).
- **Sacred places (Grade 7):** the topic was approached via whole-class discussion, with an emphasis on individual contributions from learners from various religious groups (ethnographic emphasis). The teacher used pictures to illustrate, but noted that actual visits to places of worship for her learners was lacking. Since learners had not previously known anything about the places of worship studied, 'pictures could not compensate for the real thing'. Learners were generally interested in the lesson content and brought artefacts associated with their own places of worship and explained the significance of these to their peers who found this experience quite fascinating! (Gauteng).
- **Question-and-answer activities** for the purpose of addressing misconceptions. Learners engaged in question-and-answer activities, asking questions of their peers. Learners also responded well to the teacher's attempts to address misconceptions, such as 'Buddhists worship Buddha' (Gauteng, Eastern and Western Cape).
- **Festivals presented in poster form (Grade 7):** a group investigation activity in which learners researched and presented information on a range of festivals. Each group presented their findings in poster form with the aid of artefacts. During their group presentations, learners dressed up in traditional clothing and brought their own artefacts such as lamps, incense and Christmas lights. The teacher mentioned that the learners' responses to her objective attitude had resulted in a high level of learner interaction (Gauteng and Western Cape).
- **Whole-class discussion - testing learners' knowledge (Grade 7):** one of the teachers in the Western Cape mentioned that his lessons had been lacking in information and content. Through whole-class discussion, motivated by questions-and-answers he wanted to determine the extent of his learners' knowledge of religions. He found the co-operation of the

learners towards the subject content to have been 'amazing' (ongelooftlik). Furthermore, learners showed not only a greater interest in one another, but it was clear that there was an increase in the social interaction between the children in his class who belong to various religious traditions. The session was conducted in the month of Ramadan, giving Muslim learners great opportunity to share with the class. In terms of the teacher's personal experiences of presenting information on diverse religious traditions, he indicated that for the first time he had become more conscious of the religious traditions of the children in his class and this had influenced his attitudes towards them.

Two series of lessons that are particularly noteworthy as innovative from the Gauteng region will be mentioned at this point. The one series focussed on *Religion and Love* with Grade 7 learners and the other on *My Special Place* with Grade 4 learners.

The lessons on *Religion and Love* were explored in three directions:

- The emphasis in Session 1 was on respect and tolerance. A group activity was designed in which learners compiled *Religious Policies* for their school, written up as a poster, followed by group presentations of the policies, and peer evaluation.
- Strategies for Session 2 included group role-play to present the teachings of various religious traditions on love and compassion. Learners were also required to design a questionnaire to interview a religious leader.
- Session 3 was entitled *Religion and love in music and movement*. Learners learned about love through the *love songs* of various religious traditions. Music and movement (see the learning outcomes of the Life Orientation learning area) were used to communicate ideas about love.

The series of lessons on *My Special Place* were integrated with other learning areas, such as the Social Sciences and Language and Literacy. A team of three teachers was responsible for this series, each one exploring the theme from a slightly different perspective, but generally following the same format.

- Two of the teachers introduced the topic with their learners reflecting on reasons for having a special place. Learners shared ideas about special places as places of safety and refuge, peace and quiet. Strategies included learners working in pairs, sharing with partners and in groups, and reporting back to the class as a whole. What was interesting was how the session moved from the personal, to the historical, to universal attitudes and values. The teachers introduced places of pilgrimage as special places from a historical perspective, e.g. The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and the Ka'ba in Mecca. The third teacher in the team introduced Session 1 on a different note, as *The start to an adventure*, whereby learners working in groups, using maps and information provided by the

teacher designed their own passports to visit Saudi Arabia, Israel and India.

- In Sessions 2 and 3 learners went on imaginary visits to Jerusalem and Mecca. Teachers used strategies so that learners combined information of historical significance with beliefs, practices and spiritual values. Prayer and pilgrimage were highlighted in relation to these particular places of interest and in terms of the role that prayer and pilgrimage play on a personal level. General discussions and references to factual sources such as dictionaries, atlases and narrative accounts were balanced with an emphasis on sharing feelings and emotions. Learners were encouraged to express feelings about prayer, to listen to the views of others, to write their own prayers and to share their disappointments when prayers were not answered.

All the above examples provide clear evidence of positive attempts by the participating teachers to encourage respectful and unbiased attitudes towards religion in society amongst their learners. An interesting and significant comment made by one of the Grade 4 Gauteng teachers must be noted at this point: 'that the status of religion education is uplifted when lesson content is informative and addresses those questions that have always puzzled learners'. Activities involving cognitive skills as would be utilised in any other learning area such as reading for information, oral responses within groups, research, creative writing and peer teaching underpinned the facilitation strategies implemented by the teachers. The difference, however, lay with direct emphasis being placed on promoting affective outcomes such as mutual respect towards others, more so, perhaps, than may be done in other learning areas.

An Analysis of Learner Responses to Teaching Strategies and Information on Religions

Teachers' comments in the journals from both Phases 1 and 2 of the project indicate that the introduction of content about religions and religious issues was not without its problems. What was interesting, however, was that many of the problems experienced were associated with the introduction of learners to different religions for the first time. The teachers in religiously diverse schools in the urban areas pointed out that initially a lack of knowledge, and not necessarily a lack of exposure towards religions other than their own, resulted in some learners being cautious, apprehensive or even unwilling to participate in tasks that required them to find information independently of their teachers. In the rural areas it seemed that the initial problems were related to a lack of exposure and therefore a lack of knowledge about religions other than the learners' own. According to one teacher in an Eastern Cape rural school, her learners had no knowledge of religions other than Christianity. Some learners wanted to be warned

before the teacher introduced other religions, 'because they were not allowed to hear about other religions'. Yet, it must also be pointed out that in the same journal entry the teacher mentions that the learners who are not Christian felt relieved to have been mentioned, and that they were open to discussions and explanations of their rituals when these were introduced to their peers.

Other cases of an initial reticence amongst the learners to participate in class activities came from the journals of the Gauteng teachers. In one of the schools, teachers reported that a group of Muslim learners would not participate in activities, either because they were afraid to express an opinion independently of their parents, or because they were not sure of the motives for the activity. In the outing mentioned previously in which learners sketched religious buildings, Muslim children assumed that they would be taken to churches only, so did not accompany the class on the visits. Jehovah's Witness learners in Grade 6 in the same school would only do research on their own beliefs and practices. Others were reluctant to express their feelings on various moral issues in relation to their religious beliefs. However, it appears that with some prompting from the teachers, learners eventually responded well and were able to explain how one's moral choices of 'good or bad are determined by rules and moral values.' Discussions in the lesson on *You must not kill* were influenced by the Twin Tower bombings in the USA (September 2001). What was interesting in this case was how Grade 4 learners were willing to comment on a global issue (on murder and self-defence) in the light of the bombings of the Twin Towers.

The inclusion of African religions (AR) as a separate religion caused some problems in the rural areas. Many people did not regard traditional beliefs as being a separate "religion", while others saw Christianity in conflict with ARs. However, the positive feedback far outweighed the problems. Teachers were mostly quite innovative in the ways in which they dealt with the problems. In spite of initial reluctance, learners generally responded enthusiastically to the new information introduced by their teachers. This was clearly evident in the high level of interaction amongst learners, in the way in which they listened to their peers, in their sharing of information and in the types of questions which they asked of their teachers and of one another. Learners were also particularly interested in concepts that were new to them, such as the meaning of reincarnation, meditation, various rites of passage, places of worship and differences and similarities between religions, such as between Christianity and Islam and Christianity and ARs (in rural areas).

An interesting observation made by one teacher was how children from similar religious backgrounds demonstrated varying degrees of understanding of, for example, the main symbols of their own religious tradition (cf. Roux & Steenkamp 1995). The same teacher observed how much more observant and knowledgeable her Muslim learners had been in the first phase of the project in comparison to the Muslim learners in her class in the second phase. This obser-

vation is significant since teachers are often inclined to use their learners as "resident experts" on religious traditions when in fact the families may not be devout at all, or cultural differences may result in differences in practice and ritual observances.

Comments on Action Research and Analysis of Journals

It is evident that the participation action research resulted in successful interaction between researchers, teachers and learners. Although teachers had mentioned the lack of initial participation from learners (Grade 4), and their reluctance to express feelings or points of view at the start of sessions, as lessons progressed learners seemed to change towards their teachers and they became more willing and more able to express their views on various issues. The inability of some learners to express an opinion, however, may well be related to the age and developmental stages of learners in this grade (cf. Fowler and Roux's stages of religious development in Summers & Waddington, 1996:114,124). Since Grade 4 children are approximately 9-10 years old, it is possible that the teachers were expecting too much from their learners in terms of formulating opinions independently of the attitudes and opinions of their parents. Consistent with their stages of development, the learners responded positively to concrete situations, such as cartoons and role-play. Yet it is extraordinary that they were able to connect the topic of discussion on war with the death of innocents during war and even to contemplate whether killing in self-defence is murder.

In many of the cases, problems noted by the teachers were organisational rather than content-related. Some activities, such as role-play and group research, initially took longer than anticipated, which caused group participation to fall apart. In one case, learners were often too shy to perform or demonstrate movements to music or to sing songs from their own religions in their mother tongues. The learners on the whole were able to deal with the religious content, except when they were expected to participate in activities associated with religions other than their own. This comment is a clear indication of what religious sensitivity means. While some adherents or devotees will express themselves in song and movement and are encouraged to do so, such as in various Hindu traditions, Muslims and members of some Christian denominations do not view these actions in the same light. The fine line between learner participation in first order religious activities and second order reflections on first order phenomena (Moore & Habel, 1992:27) as an educational activity, was discussed with teachers in the second phase of this project.

Some teachers indicated that facilitating learning about religions was a new experience, and as a result they were still trying to understand their own positions in relation to the content. One teacher who is also a history teacher tried to present the information in history lessons, before including the information in

the Life Orientation programme. He also felt that his role as a facilitator of learning would have to be improved. What requires comment at this point is the breakthrough with Afrikaans-speaking schools. Initial contact sessions revealed a strong resistance to religion education. However, although the teachers at this school seemed to be grappling with the content, they tried to facilitate diversity within their own frames of reference. It is therefore possible that once teachers have come to terms with the content, their confidence in developing innovative facilitation strategies will increase. One of the teachers in a multireligious Xhosa-speaking township school (Western Cape) also indicated his struggle with the content. He mentioned that the children enjoyed the visual aids. The main problem was that learners at this school knew nothing about other religions. They knew only a little about Islam, but Hinduism and Buddhism were 'too difficult'. However, the learners enjoyed discussions on different values, and on religious dress and food, possibly because these topics were more concrete.

The previous successes of the colour-coding approach (Roux 2003) helped teachers and learners to categorise information more readily. The three teachers from a more conservative religious background in the Western Cape region indicated specifically that the colour-coding helped them to effectively facilitate learning on topical issues. The fact that all the materials (posters and games) were also provided in different languages (mother tongue) contributed to the teachers' positive comments on the workshops as well as their reflections on their strategies.

In comparing the different teachers' responses it is clear that some schools have a greater awareness of religious and cultural diversity than do others. The heightened awareness in some urban schools may be due to the presence of distinct religious traditions in urban areas. People living in urban areas are more likely to observe various places of worship and people in religious dress and may even directly experience diverse religious practices, traditions and festivals amongst their peers than is likely to be the case amongst their rural counterparts. It is possible however, that many communities are simply unaware of their own religious diversity. Diversity could be defined by traditionalism, the Independent Church movements and mission Christianity in rural communities, such as those in the Eastern Cape. In the township areas, a similar type of diversity as experienced in the Eastern Cape would also be evident, with the inclusion of Islam

Evaluation of Teacher Participation in Relation to the Aims of the Action Research

Throughout the course of the project, the researchers observed that levels of innovation differed from one school to the next and from one region to the next. The teachers at the schools in the multireligious urban environments were generally more positive towards the subject content and attempted to introduce

a variety of facilitative strategies from the outset. This could be seen from the high level of learner interaction in groups and the various types of skills which the teachers incorporated into the activities.

A comparison of all the Phase 1 and 2 journals indicated that most of the teachers repeated their topics and strategies from the first phase into the second phase. Although the repetition may appear to be an indictment on the creativity of the teachers, it appears from the comments that the teachers felt that they had improved on what they had done the year before. Exposure to the vast amounts of information left some of the teachers feeling completely overwhelmed and ready to quit! Discontent as a result of their own lack of knowledge was problematic. Teachers felt that lesson preparation was time-consuming and that they still did not have adequate knowledge to address the learners' questions although they had read all the material.

The researchers concluded, therefore, that as the teachers became more familiar with the factual information, their confidence in developing innovative facilitative strategies would increase. Comments in the Phase 2 journals and in the interviews clearly indicated that there was an improvement in the attitudes of the teachers as their fears and insecurities had been allayed. Many of the teachers continued to use traditional whole-class teacher-centred methods, because they were struggling to come to terms with information that was new to them. The Gauteng teachers and the teacher in the township school in the Western Cape in particular did not view their lack of knowledge as being detrimental to the quality of their participation, but learning as they went along was merely in line with their own growth as educators. At least four of these teachers specifically mentioned that as their own understanding of certain concepts and practices improved, so they became more confident towards creating interesting learning experiences for their learners.

The researcher in the Eastern Cape schools had very little co-operation from the participating teachers in the two schools selected for the project. The teachers complained that the preparation for religion education lessons went beyond what they were doing in their classes and was a waste of time. They did not readily make themselves available for workshops, and journals were returned incomplete. It is interesting to note that the teachers also misunderstood the place of religion in the curriculum, regarding knowledge about religions as being separate from Curriculum 2005 (1997) or the National curriculum statement (2002). One teacher suggested that she was not obliged to know or teach anything about different religions, because 'this is a Christian school'. What is particularly interesting, however, is that although the initial feedback from the teachers was negative and the journals were not complete in time for submission, the comments in the second phase journals revealed an increasing interest and enthusiasm towards the presentation of the content by the learners. This change of mind may have been related to the growing interest amongst learners towards

the subject content. By the time the teachers reached sessions 3 and 4, they were reporting active involvement from amongst their learners. One teacher in particular mentioned that because knowledge of religions was lacking, she tended to dwell on Christianity and ARs, the dominant religions in the school. Making sense of how these two religions could co-exist in their particular community turned out to be a positive learning experience for both teachers and their learners. In follow-up lessons, learners started to draw comparisons which resulted in conflict between Christians and those learners who were more inclined towards African tradition. This teacher mentioned that she was able to resolve the conflict by adopting an objective, neutral position. The teacher's comment was interesting in this regard: 'I think this session was excellent. I liked the conflict anyway. It was a lesson to me and it indicated the learners' interest and understanding of their values and religions.'

Recommendations for In-Service Training for Religion Education

The researchers' interaction with the participating teachers and the comments in their journals and interviews provide some valuable considerations for in-service training in relation to the Revised National Curriculum Statement and the National Policy on Religion in Education. One area of priority that needs to be addressed lies with knowing the differences between the kind of religious education that is monoreligious and confessional and the kind that is inclusive of all religious orientations, that is informative and educational. The research data indicates that until teachers are able to make this distinction, no progress will be made.

The researchers could also not anticipate some of the myths, misconceptions and negative perceptions held by the teachers relating to religion education. These only began to surface when the journals were analysed. It is necessary to provide both teachers and learners with tools to enable them to move confidently beyond their individual, sometimes exclusive positions (religious or secular) towards an understanding of religions or beliefs other than their own. What is important is that educators are assisted in recognising their own perspectives and sense of inadequacy, and then provided with a basis for understanding the distinctive features of religions, thereby guiding them towards creative approaches to teaching and learning (cf. Nesbitt Report, 2002).

Assisting teachers to develop their writing skills may also be useful in this regard. Teachers could be producing their own ethnographic resources for classroom use, reflecting local conditions and expressions of religious traditions and secular viewpoints. Training in facilitation skills to enable teachers to deal with conflicting worldviews and value orientations and to design learner-centred activities is essential. Many teachers are grounded in particular whole-class teaching strategies and need assistance in breaking this mould. Pupil-to-pupil dialogue

(Ipgrave 2001), reflections on religious experiences, group investigation and presentations, and fieldwork in communities are useful as facilitation strategies that would take the stress off teachers needing to absorb vast amounts of information.

The results of this project reflect the process of transition from **religious education to religion education** for schools in different social and educational contexts. The results, however, are particularly significant for teachers and learners in the Afrikaans- and Xhosa-speaking schools. These schools have had to overcome a long and influential monoreligious and monocultural past, fraught with political and religious conservatism albeit for different reasons. The schools in the Gauteng (Johannesburg) area have had a fairly long history of multiculturalism and religious diversity, the one more so than the other, and were able to make the transition faster and more successfully in terms of classroom practice than the participating schools in the other two regions. However, all of these schools have become role models for other schools in South Africa of a sensible, meaningful and mature transition. The success in dealing with diversity in belief and practice will, however, ultimately be determined by the attitudes of heads of schools, teachers and parents.

Conclusion

This article attempts to provide an overview of the qualitative findings associated with a co-operative research enterprise between university educators of Religious Studies and in-service educators in religion education in the school context. The resultant data obtained from teacher participants in three regions in South Africa reveals the potential problems regarding religion in various educational settings. However, the data also emphasises that the possibilities far outweigh the problems. Almost all of the participating teachers commented on a greater awareness of the beliefs of others, an improvement in social interaction amongst their learners and a general increase in respect and acknowledgement towards one another as a result of including religion in their learning programmes.

Notes

- 1 In view of brevity a concise description of the project is presented. For a detailed description of the project see Ferguson & Roux 2003: 273-275.
- 2 The results and analyses of the interviews will not be discussed in this article.

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