Implementing a multi-faith Religious Education curriculum in Botswana junior secondary schools

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I explore the ways in which RE teachers understand and implement a multi-faith Religious Education curriculum in Botswana junior secondary schools. The multi-faith RE curriculum came about as a result of an educational policy change in 1994. The study is based on case studies and draws its data from classroom observations, interviews and documents such as the RE teaching syllabus, and the schemes of work. In highlighting the teachers' understanding and classroom practices, I adopted the concept of the teachers' professional knowledge landscape. When the multi-faith RE curriculum was introduced in Botswana, there were two groups of teachers, those who taught the multi-faith curriculum and those who taught both the single faith and the multi-faith Religious Education. Five themes emerged from the data, namely: pedagogical and content knowledge, assessment, mentoring, and collaboration. I conclude that there are no marked differences between these two groups of teachers in terms of their understanding of the curriculum and their classroom practices.

Keywords: assessment; collaboration; educational policy; mentoring; multi-faith Religious Education; pedagogical and content knowledge; teachers' professional landscape

Introduction

The year 1994 was characterised by major educational changes in post-colonial Botswana and one of the key policy shifts was the termination of the Christian-based Religious Education (RE) curriculum which was replaced by a multi-faith Religious Education curriculum (Botswana Government, 1994; Seretse, 2003). Of significance too, is that this type of curriculum aims to sensitise students in regard to issues of diversity (Botswana Government, 1995). Yet, more than ten years after the introduction of this curriculum change, little is known about how RE teachers in Botswana understand and implement the multi-faith RE curriculum. I have used the phrase multi-faith to refer to an RE curriculum of which the content is a variety of religions and which does not necessarily require students and teachers to be religious. In this study, I adopt the term curriculum as presented by Kauffmann, Johnson, Liu & Peske (2002:74) as "what and how teachers are expected to teach".

After the introduction of the multi-faith RE in schools, teachers struggled to translate this curriculum into classroom practice, largely due to a lack of pedagogical skills and content knowledge. During the inception of the multi-faith RE curriculum, RE teachers had not been adequately prepared, through intensive in-service programmes, to teach the curriculum. Two key research questions informed this study:

1. What are the practices of the Religious Education teachers in Botswana secondary schools?
2. How does the teaching environment impact on Religious Education teachers' translation of the multi-faith curriculum into practice?

Background to the study

The first major educational reform in post-independent Botswana in 1977 recommended a new Religious and Moral Education curriculum to replace Bible Knowledge as an optional subject at secondary school level (Botswana Government, 1977). The curriculum was Christian-centred, hence it required that teachers be active practitioners of Christianity. Significantly, students were equally expected to be devout Christians whose faith was to be further developed in the classrooms. It is important to note that historically, churches played a major role in education and in the national affairs of many sub-Saharan African nation states, including Botswana, hence the inclination of many African governments to accept Christian religious education (Sutcliffe, 1984).

A number of studies indicate that the Christian-inclined Religious and Moral Education curriculum was unpopular amongst Botswana teachers mainly because it had the clear intention to openly convert learners into the Christian faith (Mmolai, 1988; Morake, 1993; Seretse, 1990). As a result, this undermined both the status of the RE programme as an educational enterprise and the professional status of the RE teacher. In 1994 the Revised National Policy on Education recommended that RE be separated from Moral Education (Botswana Government, 1994) and the two became discrete and distinct subjects. Of significance too, is that Religious Education still maintained its status of being an optional subject at junior secondary school, while the Moral Education aspect was elevated to a core status, which means a subject that is compulsory for all the students (Botswana Government, 1994). Though RE is offered in all government schools alongside other optional subjects such as Design and Technology, Art, Music, Home Economics and Physical Education, it is viewed as being capable of helping in citizenship building by fostering societal values such as tolerance, respect for persons and mutual understanding (Botswana Government, 1995).

The RE curriculum is multi-faith in its content and phenomenological in its methodology (Botswana Government, 1995). It does not single out any particular religion for study, since that decision lies with the teachers. When the multi-faith RE was introduced, however, teachers who had initially taught the single faith RE were not re-trained. Furthermore, scant attention was paid to how the RE teachers teach the curriculum practically in terms of content knowledge, teaching techniques and strategies, and also how much the policy has changed them in terms of their awareness and sensitivity towards issues of diversity.

In the research literature reviewed, there are few empirical studies in terms of the classroom practices of multi-faith RE teachers in both Botswana (Matemba, 2005) and elsewhere (Ferguson & Roux, 2003; Gommers & Hermans, 2003). There is limited empirical literature on teachers' understanding and implementation of the multi-faith RE curriculum, even in European countries like Britain, where it has been in schools since the 1970s (Jackson, 1999). In a collection of articles on pedagogies edited by Grimmitt (2000), there is little reference to teachers' classroom practices because the articles concentrate on the relationship between religion and education and how both serve young people. Research on multi-faith RE in Botswana has thus far focused on perceptions of students (Ontiretse, 2001) and their attitudes towards religion (Seretse, 2003) as well as on problems regarding resources (Sepotlo, 2004).

More could be known about RE teachers' practices if studies done were to explore how teachers understand and implement the RE curriculum within their contexts. Writing from a British context, with a similar multi-faith RE curriculum, Sikes and Everington (2001:15) note that "very little is known about what it is like to be an RE teacher". Similarly, Wenglinsky (2002) observes that teachers' classroom practices are rarely studied; if these are studied they are, in most cases, far removed from the classroom environment which gives meaning to their practice; and even though that is the case, teachers' classroom practices have as marked an effect on the students' performance as the students' social background. It is against this background that the study aimed to explore RE teachers' understanding and classroom implementation of the multi-faith RE curriculum.

Conceptualising a multi-faith Religious Education curriculum

A multi-faith RE curriculum aims at promoting liberal values such as autonomy, freedom and tolerance and it can also encourage the search for common cross-cultural values in a pluralistic society (Wright, 2004). Writing from a South African post-apartheid perspective, Chidester (2003) maintains that RE, especially the multi-faith type, can help to build citizenship among young people in terms of students recognising, affirming and exploring the multiplicity of their identity, as well as the identities of those who are different from them. The emphasis of a multi-faith RE curriculum is embedded in its focus on the importance of tolerance, respect for persons and mutual understanding, especially in diverse contexts (Dagovitz, 2004; Wolf, 2004). Furthermore, the multi-faith

RE emphasises the knowledge about religion and reflection on what is happening in relation to religion (Grimmitt, 1987). It is viewed as having the potential to bring about attitude and behaviour change to those exposed to it, hence promoting a sense of good citizenship in a liberal democracy and a pluralistic society (Cox & Skinner, 1990). In teaching this type of RE, teachers expose students to ways in which different religions respond to various issues, especially contemporary ones such as equality, democracy, sexuality and many more.

Teachers' professional landscape

I explored how RE teachers understand and implement the multi-faith curriculum using Clandinin and Connelley's (1995) notion of teachers' professional knowledge landscape. The authors use the metaphor "landscape" to indicate the various contexts in which teachers operate and how the contexts influence the teachers' classroom practices.

Levin (2004) says that instituting a reform entails destabilising what is normal. Routines and relationships set and accepted by the school community are challenged, since the reform will modify, or even completely change them. The reason is that teachers belong to schools with cultures that might resist any change that is premised on a different set of beliefs. Levin (2004:34) notes that "when reforms are forced on schools that are not receptive, the school often has more influence in modifying the reform than the reform has in modifying the school". It is against this background that teachers need to be fully involved in curriculum change because they possess some degree of influence, especially regarding what happens in their classrooms.

Methodology

In this study I adopted the qualitative interpretivist approach, which is ideal for understanding a phenomenon holistically, in the way it is lived or experienced by participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1988). This study is a multiple, comparative case study of four teachers who were teaching at two public junior secondary schools and who were solicited through convenient purposive sampling. I used pseudonymns for the participating teachers and the schools which were both government owned and run. The sites were Togala and Makala junior secondary schools in an urban area in Botswana, and the teachers from the former school were Mrs Laban and Mrs Koloni, whilst Mr Tiro and Miss Rabin were from the latter. Mrs Laban was a senior teacher with 13 years teaching experience, and a Christian, while her colleague in the same school, Mrs Koloni was also a Christian and had four years of RE teaching experience. Miss Rabin who was a senior teacher at Makala Junior Secondary School had 12 years teaching experience, and indicated that she was not a religious person. Her colleague Mr Tiro had two years teaching experience, and was a lay-preacher at his church.

In each of the two schools, one of the teachers had a minimum of 10 years of RE teaching experience while the other had less. I chose the two pairs of teachers because those who had 10 years or more of RE teaching experience had taught both the old single faith, Christian-based RE, as well as the new, multi-faith RE. Those who had less experience had taught only the new, multi-faith RE. I selected two pairs of teachers in order to determine whether there were any differences between the two pairs in terms of their understanding of the curriculum and classroom practices. The two schools were selected due to their accessibility and convenience, since they were relatively close to each other. In addition, besides being in the same region and funded by government, the schools have similar facilities and enrolments.

When collecting data for this study I chose a small sample so that I could spend a considerable time with the participants. In collecting the data, I used classroom observations, pre-lesson interviews, post-lesson interviews and documents, such as schemes of work and syllabi. I used several instruments to validate my findings, i.e. in each school a teacher was observed at least 10 times over a period of eight months. After collecting the data, I analysed these according to the emerging themes.

Findings

I divided the findings into the following themes: pedagogical and content knowledge, assessment, mentoring and collaboration.

Pedagogical and content knowledge

A teacher's pedagogical content knowledge involves the way in which a teacher presents the subject matter to the students, while content knowledge refers to what the teacher knows about the subject. The teachers' pedagogical knowledge is largely influenced by their understanding of the curriculum. All four teachers used mainly group work, even though in most instances, no guidelines were given to students for the group work, nor were they made aware of the skills required to carry out the work. This is shown in the interview with Miss Rabin. When asked about the best way of teaching students to learn Religious Education she said:

> *Normally they work as a group and then present their findings to the whole class. They work in groups so that they can be able to help each other and that tends to be more effective than when a teacher stands in front of the class* (Interview with Miss Rabin, 29 September, 2006).

Students worked in groups and later presented their findings to the whole class, even though there was no clear sign of students helping each other during their discussions. Miss Rabin indicated that there were no specific skills were described to guide students when they worked in groups, even though, for her, it was the most common teaching technique. This is what she said:

> *I just give them the work. I don't tell them how they should do it, except that they should pick from the book what they think are correct answers to the question given. No particular skills are given as what to pick or not to pick* (Interview with Miss Rabin, 29 September, 2006).

Similarly, another experienced RE teacher, Mrs Laban from Togal Junior Secondary School, said that she engaged her students mainly in group work, which was followed by a presentation to the whole class. The teachers indicated that the problem with that arrangement was that students who were fluent were the ones who were constantly presenting, arguing that the main purpose of a presentation is for the audience to understand what the presenter is saying.

Both Miss Rabin and Mrs Laban said that they mixed their students so that the "*intellectually gifted*" could help those whom they referred to as "*the weak ones*". These two teachers also indicated that they did not provide their students with particular skills for discussion in their presentations of the findings to the rest of the class.

The teachers, however showed some understanding of the content knowledge, even though at times the knowledge was limited, as shown by Mr Tiro:

> *When I teach about the aims of RE there is one which says that students have to know BTR (Botswana Traditional Religion) and other religions of the world. In this case, if it says other religions, it suggests that all students who are learning RE are members of a religion called BTR, hence they need to know more about their religion compared to other religions out there* (Interview with Mr Tiro, 3 October, 2006).

Mr Tiro was not aware that a multi-faith RE curriculum does not aim at comparing and contrasting religions. Similarly, Mrs Koloni indicated that there was nothing to contrast in religions as far as the myths of creation were concerned, yet there were several syllabus objectives that contrasted various issues.

Teachers drew their examples mainly from Christianity, largely due to their dependence on textbooks. Furthermore, religious affiliation or lack of it did not explicitly influence the classroom practices of any of the teachers in the sample in terms of understanding, teaching styles, and content and curricular knowledge.

Teachers did not write out any lesson plans, and in most cases, just before going to meet their classes, they browsed through the syllabus objectives and what the students' textbooks suggested were possible class and homework tasks. It is significant to note that teachers did not fully allow their students who were religious to express their beliefs because they barely allowed their students

to refer to them. This is shown in Miss Rabin's response on the issue of diversity:

> *We always encourage them to stick to what is in their books and not what happens at home, because at home they may do certain things differently from what teachers tell them in class. We tell them to forget about their denominations* (Interview with Miss Rabin, 29 October, 2006).

In my interview with teachers, they told me that they were tolerant and open in their treatment of the various religions. For example, in my initial interview with Mrs Laban, she indicated that she encouraged openness in her treatment of religions:

> *We first make use of the learners' knowledge and what they bring into the classroom, which is very important, for example, through brain-storming* (Interview with Mrs Laban, 4 October, 2006).

Teachers indicated that they did not know their students' social and cultural backgrounds, even though they indicated that such knowledge could enhance their teaching. For example, when a newer teacher Mrs Koloni, was asked if she knew where her students came from, she said that she only met parents when they came to collect their children's reports. Similarly, Mr Tiro, another, newer teacher, said that he only met parents when they came to school to collect their children's reports. Two of the teachers, Miss Rabin and Mrs Koloni, did not know the names of some of their students and remembered them only when giving back assignments and tests, even though they had been with those students for more than two years.

With regard to teaching and learning resources, teachers depended mainly on students' textbooks, as shown by Mr Tiro, when he said "*with me I look at the students' textbooks and identify a religion that has more information*". Similarly, Mrs Koloni said that she relied on textbooks because the information is simplified:

> *I look at the information that is available in textbooks that can help the students answer a question. The information in the students' textbooks has been presented in a way that students easily understand, since it has been made simple* (Interview with Mr Tiro, 7 March, 2007).

Mrs Laban, an experienced teacher, also said she hardly used other resources besides textbooks. In addition, she indicated that her school had enough computers to use, but she did not make use of them, saying that teachers were too lazy. The over-dependence on textbooks is also shown in Miss Rabin's response to why she gave students incorrect information when she said that in Botswana and elsewhere armed robbery is one of the crimes punishable by death. When I asked her about the correctness of that information she said:

> *It is not correct, but that is what is in one of the books. We go with what is written down in the textbook. I may know what is correct, but what is important is to make sure that my students pass* (Interview with Miss Rabin, 9 March, 2007).

It is clear that anything that was viewed by teachers as helping their students to pass was emphasised, especially if it was in the textbook. This could be one reason why teachers adhered to the same teaching and learning aids and did whatever they could to help their students pass. The teachers indicated that other than the students' textbooks they never used any other teaching aid.

The teachers did not make use of a variety of learning activities such as drama, artwork, videos and visits in order to enrich their lessons, as well as to tap into the students' sense of imagination. In both schools, students were not taken out on educational trips, a practice that could have enriched the teachers' practices. For example, both schools were close to some religious sites, yet no speakers from these religious institutions were invited to address the students. Similarly, visiting and inviting speakers to talk about issues related to some topics can be an integral part in the teaching of RE, since it could help develop various thought capacities in students.

Assessment

Throughout my fieldwork the poor results in RE at national level were a common concern among teachers, who believed that the assessment was unfair, because too much was expected of the

students. Some teachers, however, ascribed the poor results to teachers' inadequate pedagogical knowledge and low levels of understanding many concepts, and others believed that it was because there was no single core textbook which could cover the content of the curriculum fully. The teachers also noted that when students failed RE, teachers came into conflict with school administrators, who believed they did not take their work seriously.

I also found that teachers did not have easy access to certain important government documents, because some circulars remained in the file of the school head or head of department. Mrs Laban, however, indicated that at times teachers were not interested in reading government documents, even when they were made available to them. Newer teachers in both schools indicated that they had never read any RE report since they had started teaching.

When I asked Mrs Koloni about her allocation of marks in a test her students had written, she said that she had certain expectations from her students. Even though she said that she did not make her expectations known to her students, she assumed that they could find out for themselves how they were to answer questions. She was, however, convinced that she assessed her students fairly. Similarly, when I asked Miss Rabin how, for example, she awarded marks for an end of term examination question: "Discuss the creation of human beings according to the scientific explanation" she said:

> *I expected them to write on evolution, but there was confusion, because most students wrote about anything that they knew about creation. I could have asked the question like: Describe the 4 stages of human development according to science* (Interview with Miss Rabin, 9 March, 2007).

In another test Miss Rabin's students wrote, there was a question where the mark allocation was too low and did not tally with the demands of the question. The question was: Give and explain the two types of leadership (2 marks). Providing the two types of leadership is worth two marks, while explaining those two types is worth much more.

When I asked Mrs Laban, another experienced teacher, why she penalised her students for using a religion of their choice as the question demanded, she said:

> *It is the marks allocated per question that should guide students as to what choice they should make regarding a religion. Several religions will have been dealt with, but the student should choose one with more points in order to score more* (Interview with Mrs Laban, 23 May, 2007).

She indicated that questions were determined by the nature of the curriculum, which she said needed to be revised, because it had some shortcomings. It is interesting to note that each time teachers encountered difficulty in understanding the curriculum and classroom practices, especially assessment, they blamed the RE curriculum. Even though teachers were unhappy with RE assessment, they rarely collaborated as colleagues.

Mentoring and collaboration

Another issue that emerged, was that after graduating and joining teaching, RE teachers did not receive any mentoring in their schools. They said that it was because the older and the more experienced teachers did not have time to mentor new members and that there was very little collaboration among teachers within and across schools, and that many RE teachers were mainly left to their own devices. Teachers in the two schools did not watch each other teach, and as a result they lost an opportunity to be observed and to discuss their classroom practices with their colleagues. When I asked Mrs Laban, if there was collaboration, especially across schools, she said there used to be, but it had gradually disappeared. Similarly, Mr Tiro indicated that there was no collaboration among RE teachers in his school and that the poor junior certificate results could be a result of the lack of collaboration amongst RE teachers.

Mrs Koloni indicated that she had never taught a topic for a colleague or vice-versa. Similarly, Miss Rabin indicated that there was lack of collaboration within schools, because teachers across

subjects did not work together. She, however, indicated that collaboration across subjects could be of help to teachers, since they could learn from one another, especially regarding related subjects. She said: "*RE teachers could benefit especially from Social Studies, which is detailed in some topics*".

The teachers also indicated that junior teachers were not adequately assisted in their schools. For example, Miss Rabin indicated that in her first two years in the field she was not assisted when the new multi-faith RE curriculum was first introduced. She said that she had not received any support from any senior teacher, even of a related subject, and that she was left to her own devices. A newer teacher, Mrs Koloni, admitted that she had had no form of orientation in her school especially regarding what she was expected to do as an RE teacher. She also indicated that there was no collaboration, not even among schools.

Conclusion

While in theory the multi-faith RE curriculum has to emphasise knowledge and understanding, in practice teachers have modified it so that students are able to pass RE examinations. Passing examinations was, during the interviews, shown to be a priority over knowledge and understanding of the subject. The teachers engaged their students mainly in group work, and no particular skills were explained or focused upon regarding this exercise. Furthermore, teachers chose religions that they preferred teaching about, although that was not the expectation of the curriculum. It is remarkable to note that there were no differences between RE teachers who were actively religious and those who were not, in terms of understanding and classroom practice.

Teachers did not use students' knowledge and experiences as a resource in relation to their religious affiliation or lack of religious affiliation when teaching, hence students were not viewed as a unique and valuable teaching and learning resources. Where the students' knowledge was used, it went only as far as brainstorming, and not beyond. Teachers did not model skills that could encourage learners to be open and tolerant, since the teachers themselves were not tolerant and open in their treatment of the various religions, because they concentrated on Christianity.

Teachers did not use a range of easily available resources, such as the library and the internet, to increase their own and their students' knowledge about religions, because they relied heavily on textbooks. They did not retrieve information, especially on some of the religions regarding which inadequate information was provided in textbooks.

It is important to note that RE teachers should be provided with more opportunities to receive professional in-service training each time there is a curriculum change. Furthermore, teachers as a learning community need to collaborate in regard to reform as a way of shaping their professional development. Finally, there is need for qualitative and quantitative research on how RE teachers interpret a multi-faith RE curriculum in their classrooms, and the need for research on how the teaching of a multi-faith RE curriculum can affect RE teachers emotionally, i.e. in terms of how they accept or reject it.

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