Teacher participation in facilitating beliefs and values in life orientation programmes: reflections on a research project

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This article presents an analysis of a research project entitled Facilitating strategies of belief and value orientations in a multicultural education system. The main objective of the research project was to ascertain whether teachers could by means of participatory action research modify their own strategies relating to teaching and learning about religions, beliefs and value systems in South Africa. 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 contexts. Responses were obtained from teachers in Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Gauteng. Both responses and facilitation strategies selected by teachers are connected to the cultural and religious backgrounds of learners represented in participating schools. The theoretical underpinnings relating to the research project, as well as the preparation of in-service teachers for their participation in this research project in the short term and for effective practices for the long term, are discussed.

Introduction
The aim of this article is to present a description and related analysis of the core elements of a research project entitled Facilitating strategies of belief and value orientations in a multicultural education system. The following will be addressed: the motivation for the project; a description of the nature of the project in terms of the methodology employed and a very short analysis and discussion of some of the results of teacher participation.

Motivation
Since 1995, many public debates in South Africa have emphasised the need for mutual respect amongst people of different cultures, religions and belief and value systems. The interest in communal values, with a particular focus on knowledge about and understanding of diversity, is an international trend. Countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, The Netherlands, Norway, Malawi and Namibia have been involved in curriculum development around issues of diversity, citizenship and values education, particularly over the last decade. In the wake of social and political transformation in South Africa and with the growing trend towards globalisation, the responsibility for developing inclusive curricula is emphasised in the various policy documents, such as the Life Orientation Learning Area in Curriculum 2005 (1997), the Revised National Curriculum Statement (2001), the Manifesto on Values in Education (2001) and the Revised National Curriculum Statement (2002), and more recently the Draft Policy Document on Religion in Education (2003). Research conducted since 1993 (Roux & Steenkamp, 1995) in South African schools on the nature of religion in education has clearly indicated that new approaches are required in order for religion and values in education to remain relevant in terms of the processes of transformation and globalisation. Policies on diversity have urged educators internationally to re-think the position of beliefs, religions and values in education (UNESCO-Conference on Intercultural Education, Finland, 2003).

The research project
The project was undertaken with the central aim of enabling teachers to determine the place of religion, religions, religious diversity and beliefs and values in the curriculum, particularly in Life Orientation. An additional aim was to provide teachers with tools to develop innovative strategies to facilitate learning around content associated with different belief and value orientations in Life Orientation programmes. The research team consisted of lecturers in Didactics and Religious Studies at the University of Stellenbosch, the University of Witwatersrand, the University of Transkei and the Peninsula Technikon in Cape Town (Wellington Campus). The project commenced in January 2001 and was executed in two phases (2001, 2002). The first phase comprised the following: a detailed literature study with a focus on clarifying ambiguous terminology, such as belief(s) and value(s) and a comparison of international curricula; the development of material for the presentation of in-service training workshops and the completion and analysis of journals by the participating teachers.

In the second phase (2002), additional workshops and discussion groups were held with the participating teachers to assess what had been accomplished to date; to evaluate successes and problem areas as identified in the journals; to discuss the methods devised and implemented by the teachers and to provide assistance where this was required. Qualitative, individual interviews with teachers were conducted at selected schools to verify comments made in journals by the participants and to express their opinions on their involvement in the project. The second phase also focused on the learners' participation and reflections. A later article will focus on the final analyses of the teachers' and learners' perceptions.

Participation action research
Participation action research, as a research procedure was chosen for this project. The experiential learning and reflection of both the teachers as practitioners and their learners was important. In order to develop balanced training programmes it was also necessary at the outset to understand the participants' frame of reference, perceptions and level of knowledge. One of the problems, as indicated in Carl *et al.* (1999), concerning in-service training programmes, is the influence of external factors on teachers' perceptions of new curricula and new education models. Teaching and/or facilitating new content can become counterproductive if there is insufficient time for reflection on the changes effected by a new model and the principles underlying it. On these grounds, the type of in-service programmes that would empower teachers to take ownership of a new model in relation to religion had to be considered. The combination of two types of action, *viz.* participation of the teachers and their reflections on the content and teaching, with the experiential reflective learning of their learners (Kolb, 1984 in Moon, 1999; Ferguson & Roux, in press) formed the basis of the research methodology. In accordance with the spirit of action research, the teachers as practitioners had the opportunity to investigate and reflect upon their own practices with a view to changing the content or to adapting their own teaching and learning strategies in ways that would be beneficial to their learners.

Research design
The research design was ethnographic and qualitative in nature (McCutcheon, 1999, Hammersley, 1990:1-3; 25) guided by theoretical notions with evaluative elements for programme evaluation.

Selection of schools

Three regions were targeted, *viz*. Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Gauteng. An attempt was made to include teachers from school environments in metropolitan, urban and rural areas, from different cultural environments and language groups. Afrikaans-, English- and Xhosa-speaking communities were identified. The participating schools included:

- Three schools and six teachers in the Western Cape. Two of the schools were Afrikaans-medium, the teachers Afrikaans-speaking and the learners from mainly Christian and Muslim backgrounds. The other school had Xhosa-speaking learners and teachers from Independent Christian Churches (ICC) and African Traditional Religions (ATR).
- Two English-medium schools and seven teachers in Gauteng. These schools were multireligious and the learners were representative of at least four different religions practised in South Africa. Both schools were situated in metropolitan urban areas.
- Two schools and two teachers in the Eastern Cape. These schools were rural schools and the teachers and learners were Xhosa-speaking. Learners were also from Independent Christian Churches (ICC) and African Traditional Religions (ATR).

The majority of the participating teachers were responsible for Grades 4–7 and two for Foundation Phase classes. The general approach to the interaction with the participating teachers in the project was closely related to programmes conducted by the researchers amongst student teachers at the College of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand and at the University of Stellenbosch. The researchers found that pre-service teachers who had been exposed to religions other than their own through open, unbiased and informative intervention programmes were able to handle content about religions and values more confidently themselves (Ferguson, 1999:143-144; 164; Roux, 2000).

Workshops

A series of four workshops was conducted in each of the three regions. The first workshop consisted of a qualitative research questionnaire that teachers were requested to complete. The aim of the questionnaire was to gather data on the perceptions, intrinsic knowledge and views regarding belief and value systems and orientations amongst participating teachers. Questions were also raised for discussion to elicit the following information from the teachers:

- their own positions in relation to religiously diverse classes;
- the level of their own self-confidence in handling materials on diverse belief and value systems in South Africa;
- their particular fears, prejudices and biases in presenting content about religious traditions other than their own;
- the level of awareness of religious traditions in their schools and neighbourhoods;
- the extent of their own knowledge of religious beliefs and traditions practised in South Africa.

The first workshop was important because participants were being guided towards making the paradigm shift from confessional religious education to an open, inclusive study of religions or Religion education. Teachers were given the opportunity to consider what they could learn about, through and from beliefs and values, rather than favouring one religious tradition only.

The second and third workshops focused upon religious diversity through a study of some main beliefs, practices and values of six religions practised in South Africa, *viz*. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and African Traditional Religions. Participants were encouraged to observe differences within these main religions as examples of diversity as well as the evidence of secular or non-religious ways of life (Jackson, 1997). Participants were presented with some significant values evident in each of the religions, and encouraged to identify similar values or moral responses in those religious traditions with which they were most familiar. Attention was drawn to mutual values across religious traditions, but which were also consistent with living in a democratic society. Examples of values such as love and compassion for others, the value of life, respect toward self and others and the meaning of adopting a positive life orientation were identified and discussed in relation to religions (Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy, Department of Education, 2001:44-45).

In the fourth and final workshop, teachers were introduced to participatory action research. The role of the teachers in the whole process was discussed. Ethnography as a concept was introduced in relation to the religious and cultural diversity of the teachers and learners in their capacity as potential fieldworkers. Thus the particular background of both teacher and learner became significant as a valuable resource to be explored. The teachers were encouraged to be creative and to explore their own resources. They could experiment with and develop strategies that would be suited to their particular school environment. Teachers were given the opportunity to identify teaching strategies that would enable them to adopt a facilitative role in their presentation of information on religious traditions and values. The workshop facilitators provided some ideas such as the use of religious artefacts to develop an understanding of the value of sacred objects for adherents of a religious tradition; the use of artefacts as a means towards interpreting religious symbols and setting up rotating research stations whereby learners would discover interesting information for themselves; sharing information with peers and engaging in dialogue about beliefs, practices and personal experiences with their peers. Teachers were also introduced to the system of colour-coding religions whereby teachers and learners used the identified colours for each of the religious traditions to be studied, viz. green for Islam, purple for Christianity, red for Hinduism (Roux & Steenkamp, 1995; Roux, 2003). Thereafter, all posters, worksheets, information cards and any other materials were designed in the assigned colours so that learners could associate the information about a religious tradition with the specific colour. This allowed learners to categorise information more readily.

In the final workshop, teachers were also introduced to the journals in which they would record and reflect upon each session. Teachers were required to record their successes, shortcomings of lessons, learner-responses and attitudes of learners and parents to both the teacher and the content handled during the sessions. At the beginning of the second phase an additional workshop in each region was held. The motivation was to discuss and to counter problems identified in the first journals (collected October 2001). The questions in the journals were changed because the first journals had not allowed for adequate comment from the teachers. Workshops were held in the different regions to discuss the implementation strategies for Phase 2. Both qualitative and individual interviews with teachers were conducted at the selected schools. The aim was to gather and interpret teachers' perceptions, intrinsic knowledge and views regarding the implementation of new strategies on different belief and value systems expressed in the Life Orientation programmes during the first phase. The second phase journals were collected and analysed in relation to the qualitative interviews. Triangulation for the trustworthiness of the data was implemented as follows: the project leader and research assistants decoded the transcript interviews independently, after which the decoded data was reviewed in collaboration with the participants.

Resources

In order to assist the participating teachers, the following resources were developed by the researchers and the research assistants:

- a comprehensive set of notes, providing an overview of each of the six religions (however, teachers were encouraged to make use of supplementary resources);
- a set of colour-coded posters highlighting some main, observable features of the six religions to be studied;
- two sets of colour-coded games that require learners to categorise and match information about religions correctly. This was extremely valuable for the Foundation Phase action research (Roux, 2003).

All the material was presented in English, Afrikaans and Xhosa so that it would accessible to all participating teachers and learners.

Application phase

No intervention was provided after the workshops in Phases 1 and 2. Teachers were given enough time to develop their own sessions. Neither prescribed topics nor methods were given on how the supplied material should be used. The central focus of the project was to encourage creative participation amongst the teachers and they were encouraged to use supplementary resources. Unfortunately only teachers in the metropolitan areas who had access to research facilities made use of other supplementary resources. Teachers in the rural areas were confused as to what type of resources should be used. They tended to use only the visual materials supplied by the researchers. Unfortunately there were also very few new, inventive strategies.

The results in relation to the aims of the project

A few important aspects were identified:

•   The uncertainty and lack of knowledge remains

Not all the teachers were able to develop new strategies after only a few workshops. Although this finding in not new (Carl *et al.*, 1999) one would have expected that with a comprehensive set of notes and attendance of the workshops, the teachers would not have been that uncertain about their content knowledge. Some participating teachers, particularly in the Eastern Cape, found it very difficult to adapt to the new content. Since most in-service teachers had been trained in mono-religious education only (Christianity) content about world religions was by and large unknown to them.

•   Intervention in remote areas remains difficult

Intervention was difficult in the remote areas. One teacher in a rural school applied an outdated paradigm for teaching religion, beliefs and values. Her misunderstanding of the position of religion in the curriculum resulted in the application of a devotional or confessional approach to the multireligious content. She clearly had not understood her role as facilitator as she continued to apply more traditional teaching strategies.

•   Negative perceptions remain

The lack of understanding of and negative perceptions towards religions other than their own resulted in resistance amongst some of the teachers to acquire the new content and therefore to attempt innovative teaching strategies.

•   Misunderstanding of facilitation strategies

Some teachers seem to have misunderstood the place of group work, equating group work with OBE. These teachers had not come to terms with the idea that outcomes-based education includes new strategies for teaching and learning over and above the contents of the curriculum policy documents. However, one teacher at a Xhosa-speaking township school and two at an Afrikaans-medium suburban ex model C school adapted the new content to their own particular circumstances and abilities. They introduced the new content using a traditional whole-class discussion approach, but nevertheless succeeded in improving the learning environment. This indicated that the perceptions of these teachers had changed in a positive sense although new teaching and learning strategies had not been applied in the classroom. Teachers in the Gauteng schools were more positive towards teaching and learning about religions from the outset. They were confident about trying new and innovative strategies.

Short summary of facilitation strategies

A very short summary of some of the facilitation strategies implemented by the teachers is presented below.[1] In terms of participation, the teachers decided upon topics and strategies without any interference from the researchers. Some teachers (Grade 4) tended to work

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1   For a detailed discussion and analysis of the facilitation strategies and learners' reflections see R Ferguson and C Roux: A qualitative analysis of participatory action research in facilitating beliefs and values in schools (in press).

from a moral/ethical issue towards religious content, while others worked with more explicit facts and information about religions working towards values (Grade 6).

• Visits to places of worship (a church and a mosque), with an art focus in mind.
• "Show `n tell" using religious artefacts or sacred objects whereby learners were required to explain the significance of the artefacts to their peers.
• Group activities in which the learners designed and presented posters on beliefs, practices, rituals, symbols, dress, and places of worship and sacred functionaries of the major religions practised in South Africa.
• Discussion groups. It was also interesting to note how discussions on particular religious content led to discussions on a range of other values-related issues, such as stereotyping and misconceptions about certain religious beliefs or practices.
• Cartoon pictures and role-play. Teachers introduced issues pertaining to rules and values using cartoon pictures. Strategies included role-play on for example; You must not kill, which resulted in whole-class and group discussions.
• Greetings. Learners were introduced to greetings in different cultures and religious traditions.
• Sacred places. The content was approached via whole-class discussion, with an emphasis on individual contributions from learners from various religious groups (ethnographic).
• Question-and-answer activities for addressing misconceptions.
• Festivals in poster form. Learners were involved in group research and presentations. Each group presented their findings in poster form with the aid of artefacts.
• Experimenting with learners' knowledge. One of the teachers mentioned that his lessons had been lacking in information and content, but that he had been experimenting with the learners' knowledge of religious traditions and found the co-operation of the learners towards the subject content to have been amazing.
• Narratives. Facilitating strategies in some cases were developed mainly from the posters given.

The teachers at the schools in the areas where religious and cultural diversity were more evident, were generally more positive towards the subject content and attempted to introduce a variety of facilitative strategies. This could be seen from the high level of learner interaction in groups and the various types of skills required for task completion.

Comments on action research and analysed journals

It seems 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 moral 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 and peers. Consistent with their stages of development, the learners responded positively to concrete situations, such as cartoons and role-play. Yet 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.

It appears that problems experienced by participating teachers were associated with strategies rather than with actual content. The learners on the whole were able to deal with the religious content, except when they were expected to participate in the singing of songs from religious traditions 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 adherents to 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 experiences. One teacher had always taught History and was trying to present the information in History lessons, before integrating the information into 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. In contact sessions with some Afrikaans-medium ex model C schools prior to this project, a strong resistance to religion education had been obvious. However, although the teachers at this school seemed to be grappling with the content, they tried to facilitate diversity within their own frame of reference. It is therefore possible that once the 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 also indicated his struggle with the content. He preferred teaching the skills more than the information. 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 working with different values, as well as with the content on religious dress and food, possibly because these topics were more concrete. The teacher worked directly from the posters, but was not certain "whether the method is working — I let them experience and explain the content to me and the class."

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. 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) and NCS (2002), or refusing to participate because the school was a Christian school. They did not readily make themselves available for workshops, and journals were returned incomplete.

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 various religious dress and may even directly experience diverse religious practices, traditions and festivals amongst their peers than 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.

Conclusion

What comes to the fore is that the success or lack of it in dealing with religious diversity in classrooms will be determined by the particular social circumstances of schools, the background and training of teachers, the quality of in-service training programmes and the teachers' attitudes towards religious and cultural diversity. The positive attitudes of some if not all of the teachers involved in this project impacted on their modes of delivery and sensitised them towards acknowledging and embracing diversity in their schools. The teachers who have become involved in this project have been involved for a short time only. Their journal entries indicated that some had been more successful than others. The researchers are quite aware that there are many other schools in South Africa in which teaching and learning about religions has been a successful enterprise, while many others lack resources both human and visual, need exposure to religious and cultural diversity and have little opportunity or means to be in contact with communities outside of their own. However, the project was an attempt to challenge a small group of teachers to reconsider their roles as teachers in the truest sense of the word and perhaps even to become role models for others.

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