Paving the Way to Transformation: Student Teachers' Religious Identity and Religion Education

Janet Jarvis

Abstract

In South Africa, Religion Education refers specifically to a diversity of religions and beliefs. The *Religion and Education Policy* (2003) requires teachers to adopt a multi- religious approach to Religion Education. This presents a challenge to Life Orientation student teachers given the religious diversity in South African classrooms. This article focuses on final year Life Orientation student teachers, in the School of Education at a South African university. Once qualified, these student teachers will be expected to facilitate Religion Education as part of the Life Orientation curriculum. I explore their understanding of religious freedom as a constitutional right and how their religious identity influences their approach to Religion Education. This qualitative case study, which drew on the theory of identity negotiation, showed that, to varying degrees, the students struggled to adopt a multi-religious approach to Religion Education. I contend that Initial Teacher Education Life Orientation modules, need to create space for student teachers to explore and negotiate their religious identity. This is necessary for the effective implementation of the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003) which expects teachers to encourage learners to grow in their own religious beliefs while also empathetically respecting the religious beliefs of others in society.

Keywords: Religion Education; religious freedom; religious identity negotiation, empathetic-reflective-dialogue

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Background to the Study

In this article I contend that the religious[1] identity of Life Orientation[2] student teachers[3] can either entrench religious discrimination or promote religious dialogue in the classroom. Religious identity in this article does not refer only to formal institutionalised religion but also includes belief or worldview, whatever it may be. The 'policy image' (Jansen 2001) that is depicted by the *Religion and Education Policy* (Department of Education 2003) requires teachers to show an appreciation of, and respect for, people of different values, beliefs, practices and cultures. Student teachers, therefore, are expected to acquire knowledge of the principles and practices of the main religions represented in South Africa. Samuel and Stephens (2000: 478) contend that teachers

> walk a tightrope in both developing a personal [religious] identity which sits comfortably with their own sense of self and maintaining a balance between satisfying the requirements of state and society and providing the source and impetus for change.

Such a requirement could conflict with the student teacher's personal religious identity. There is a need to juxtapose the policy image and teacher personal religious identity and to explore the interrelationship between these identities. I recommend that space should be made in the Initial Teacher Education Life Orientation modules to explore this possible identity conflict. By doing so, it is reasonable to anticipate that student teachers will be better equipped to manage their religious identity and implement the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003).

As part of the Life Orientation module that I teach to a combination of 3rd and 4th year student teachers who are preparing to teach in the General

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[1] By referring to the religious identity of student teachers I also include those who perhaps have no religious persuasion and who might consider themselves to be atheistic or agnostic.

[2] Life Orientation is a compulsory subject in the South African school curriculum. It focuses on the personal, social and physical development of learners.

[3] Student teachers are also known as pre-service teachers or teacher trainees.

Education and Training (GET) band, I focus on Religion Education[4] as it falls within the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy* (CAPS) (Department of Basic Education 2011) Life Orientation curriculum.[5] Student teachers deliberate the notion that religious freedom is a constitutional human right which finds expression in the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003). It is reasonable to assume that if a student teacher understands the human right to freedom of religion or belief within a context of religious diversity, s/he would understand the need for a policy such as the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003) and the implementation thereof. It is therefore my contention that for student teachers to implement the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003) wholeheartedly, they have to first understand and own the human right to freedom of religion or belief in order to enable them to facilitate the teaching-learning[6] about the diversity of religions and beliefs represented in South Africa. The *Religion and Education Policy* (2003: 2) promotes a co-operative model for schools and recognizes religious diversity while protecting learners from 'religious discrimination and coercion'.

Together, the student teachers and I considered the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003) and the implications for Religion Education as part of the Life Orientation curriculum. Discussion and debate centred on the context of religious diversity in South African schools and the challenges in implementing the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003). Emerging from the debate was the tension between policy image and personal religious identity. This led me to problematise the issue of religious identity. Guided by Goodson (1992: 10) who advocates that it is critical to know about 'the

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[4] Religion Education in South Africa has its beginnings in the work of 1970s South African exiled academic, Basil Moore (Moore, 1991).

[5] In the GET intermediate phase (Grades 4 – 6) Life Orientation is referred to as Life Skills. Religion Education is a topic embedded in Life Skills. In the GET senior phase (Grades 7 – 9) Religion Education falls within the broader topic "Constitutional rights and responsibilities". In the Further Education and Training band (Grades 10 -12), Religion Education falls within the topic "Democracy and human rights".

[6] This term implies that both teaching and learning are equally important if the classroom experience is to be successful (Jacobs, Vakalisa, & Gawe, 2011).

person the teacher is', I facilitated a discussion in which it emerged that student teachers, in addition to becoming practitioners, are individual persons with a unique history and identity which will impact on their work. Together we explored the notion that their religious identity could have a direct bearing on their teaching-learning of Religion Education.

In support of this notion I referred the student teachers to research (Jarvis 2008) which took place in selected KwaZulu-Natal primary schools. This study showed clearly that in-service teachers of Life Orientation who were not formally trained Life Orientation specialist teachers had to negotiate their religious identity when it came to teaching-learning Religion Education. It became apparent that these teachers had not had the opportunity to engage in any training or preparation for the shift from a mono-religious to a multi-religious approach. Neither had they had the opportunity to engage with any religious identity negotiation (Nias 1985; 1989) as they grappled with their personal religious identity and the *Religion and Education Policy (2003)* expectations to employ a teaching-learning approach that included religions or beliefs other than their own. Research conducted in South Africa (Jarvis 2008; Mitchell, Mndende, Phiri & Stonier 1993; Roux 2005) has shown that teachers who are deeply committed to a particular religion, especially if it is exclusivist in nature, experience discomfort when teaching-learning Religion Education. They consider a multi-religious approach as a betrayal of their particular religion and a difficult paradigm shift to make.

Against this backdrop, it was collectively agreed by myself as the lecturer and the student teachers that they would be given the opportunity to explore their own religious identities and the 'understandings that [they] hold of themselves in relation to official policy images' (Jansen 2001: 242). I anticipated that this exploration could possibly mark the first step in the process of reconciling policy image with personal religious identity.

Theoretical Framework/ Literature Review – Religious Identity Formation

In order to conceptualise how student teachers construct their religious identity, and how this impacts on their approach to Religion Education, I

drew on identity theory as a theoretical framework. In particular I focused on certain key ideas, namely the notion of multiple identities (Giddens 2002) and identity negotiation (Nias 1985; 1989) to explore how student teachers formed their religious identity. Underpinning these principles is the view that identities are not fixed over time and space but rather, that they are multi-faceted and dynamic (Baumeister 1997; Kearney 2003; Randall 1995) consisting of membership of social groups (Newman, 1997) or organizing principles (Wetherell 1996). These organizing principles (Wetherell 1996) include nationality, ethnicity, class, occupation, gender, race, sexuality, age and religion. Each of these intersects and interacts with the other. Individuals identify with specific groups that they perceive themselves to belong to, thereby bolstering their self-esteem and sense of identity. Postmodernists like Harro (2000) describe how socialisation begins from birth when individuals are shaped into particular identities by already existing structures such as history, traditions, beliefs, prejudices and stereotypes, and influenced by powerful social, religious and cultural agents like schools and religious institutions. I find these identity theories helpful in understanding how student teachers who are possibly rooted in a particular religion, and who constitutionally have the religious freedom to do so, could well have to negotiate the management of their own religious identity as they approach Religion Education in a context of religious diversity.

As student teachers move between the private and public domains of their life they are required to distinguish between their personal and professional self. I draw on Giddens (2002) and Bendle (2002) who speak of 'multiple identities' when describing how student teachers have to decide which of these identities is appropriate, depending on the social context. While some student teachers may be comfortable teaching-learning Religion Education, I contend that there are student teachers who may experience what Jansen (2001) describes in this context as an identity conflict. They are South Africans bound by the constitutional emphasis on freedom of religion or belief with the expectation to adopt an inclusive, multi-religious approach to teaching-learning Religion Education. However, they may simultaneously be adherents of a religion which is exclusive in nature, exhorting them to disregard any religion other than their own (Jarvis 2008; Mitchell et al. 1993; Roux 2005). It is my contention that student teachers will have to manage these multiple identities as they move in and out of a variety of social

contexts, not least their religious community and the religiously diverse Religion Education class. Individuals choose the identity they wish to embrace as they move from one context to another. The possible conflict between their professional and personal religious identity could impact on their classroom practice. Student teachers may struggle with Religion Education because they could well feel that they are compromising their own religious identity. Religion Education teachers are required to put into parenthesis their own religion or belief while not necessarily undermining this (Jackson 1997; Jarvis 2008). In order to do so a process of religious identity negotiation would have to take place (cf. Nias 1985; 1989).

While student teachers may have inherited sets of paradoxes and ambivalences their identities are not fixed or predetermined, but rather a self-reflective project, always in the process of formation thereby making identity negotiation possible (Giddens 2002; Kearney 2003). Drawing on Wetherell (1996), making the distinction between the collective identity or social message and the individual identity, I maintain that while student teachers are born into specific religious contexts, each individual has the power to design his/her own religious identity. It is my contention that when organizing principles such as religion, are addressed in Religion Education as part of the broader Life Orientation curriculum, it is reasonable to assume that if student teachers have not engaged in self-reflection and negotiation of their own religious identity, there is the potential to create less than the intended outcome as expressed in the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003).

Roux (1998) posits the notion of paradigm paralysis, paradigm paradox and paradigm flexibility as lenses through which the teaching-learning of Religion Education is approached. Her conclusion is that it is unhelpful to look to the future through the lenses of old paradigms such as a mono-religious approach to teaching-learning Religion Education. She conceded, however, that replacing a well-worn, comfortable paradigm is not an easy matter. In order to embrace a new paradigm, namely a multi-religious approach to teaching-learning Religion Education, teachers need to exercise paradigm flexibility. I have modified, applied and extended this notion to analyse the data emanating from this study. Student teacher responses will be organised according to those who experience religious identity paralysis, religious identity paradox and religious identity flexibility (Jarvis 2009).

Methodology

The qualitative, empirical study, using a case study approach, within an interpretivist research paradigm was conducted within the School of Education at a South African university. The purposively selected participants were 3rd and 4th year student teachers who were registered for an initial teacher education module called Life Orientation, preparing them to teach in the GET band. I obtained informed consent from these students after explaining that their anonymity would be protected and that their responses would be used to further inform teacher development in the domain of Life Orientation. They were required to complete a self-administered questionnaire containing both closed-ended questions (biographical detail) and open-ended questions. The latter allowed the student teachers to respond freely as they expressed their understanding of religious freedom, the impact which they thought their religious affiliation would have on their approach to teaching-learning Religion Education, and the reasons why they either did or did not feel equipped to teach Religion Education. The responses to the survey allowed me to explore themes that emerged. I then selected those student teachers in their 4th year, as they would be teaching-learning the following year, and conducted a semi-structured focus group interview with these student teachers during which I was able to probe further their responses to the self-administered questionnaire.

After reading through the data collected from the self-administered questionnaires and from the semi-structured focus group interviews, I organised the data, looking specifically for responses that would demonstrate how the participants negotiated (or failed to negotiate) their religious identity in response to the expectations of the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003). The participants' responses were organised into the following categories: religious identity paralysis, religious identity paradox and religious identity flexibility.

Student Teacher's Responses
Religious Identity Paralysis

Religious identity paralysis refers to the inability to even consider any form of religious identity negotiation. Student teachers who fell into this category

were those who came from mono-religious environments and who displayed signs of fear or discomfort at being placed in multi-religious environments where they would have to facilitate lessons about belief systems and values which were not part of their religious and spiritual traditions (Jarvis 2008; Roux, Du Preez, & Ferguson 2007). They were student teachers who were bound by their biography and membership of certain social categories and who, when approaching Religion Education in a context of religious diversity refused to negotiate their religious identities. For fear of compromising their own religious identity, they chose not to accept any religion other than their own and chose to teach using only a mono-religious approach. These student teachers experienced difficulty as they struggled to reconcile their own religious identity with the religiously diverse context in which they would be teaching-learning. Their responses, seen below, reflected the desire to engage with their religion only and an unwillingness to accept religious diversity and a need for change.

> Maya[7]: Not everyone is open-minded and believe[s] in other religions …. I believe the religion I follow is the best and that's the only God that exists.

> Farida: In my belief I am supposed to promote only Islam. That is the basic requirement for any Muslim. How can I go against that? It will go against everything I believe in.

> Sipho: I can't compromise with something, especially not with my religion.

> Simon: I will stick more to what I believe!

These students had all embraced the religion with which they had been raised. While they were able to describe religious freedom as a human right they clearly expressed that they were not prepared to negotiate their religious identity. Farida went so far as to say that if she was forced to promote religious freedom she would give up her job.

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[7] The names used in this article are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the student teachers who participated in this study.

Religious Identity Paradox

Student teachers who experienced something of a religious identity paradox were those who felt bounded by their own religious identity but who, unlike those in the previous category, desired to negotiate their identities in order to embrace a multi-religious approach to Religion Education so as to be more inclusive. However, this would not be without difficulty and they felt that they would be unable to do so. This position would render them ineffective in moving towards a multi-religious approach to Religion Education. These student teachers would be unable to successfully negotiate their religious identity and while they experienced a measure of discomfort at the marginalisation of religions other than their own, they expressed an inability to promote religious freedom as is illustrated by the following cameos.

Julie, a committed Christian, believes that her religion is 'right'. She expressed an identity paradox when she said:

> Although I believe there is only one truth/way, I can never force my belief on others because that will discriminate against other learners.

While expressing the view that her religion should not be imposed on the learners, she nevertheless expressed the concern that by adopting a multi-religious approach she would be compromising her own 'essence and [religious] identity' and she was not prepared to do so.

Sandile expressed a similar sentiment saying:

> I shouldn't discriminate [against] others in order to make them feel uncomfortable and not accommodated.

Having acknowledged this, Sandile still did not see his way clear to adopting a multi- religious approach to Religion Education, adding that 'all these new ideas are confusing us more'. The 'ideas' he was referring to are the expectations of the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003).

What became evident in the interview was that these students, aware of the religious diversity in schools and the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003) directives to adopt a multi- religious approach to Religion Education, were visibly uncomfortable with promoting a mono-religious approach to

Religion Education. However, taking the step towards negotiating their religious identity was considered too much of a compromise, and so they maintained their position.

Religious Identity Flexibility

Religious identity flexibility refers to the ability to consider religions other than one's own without feeling compromised or threatened. Student teachers who expressed a measure of individual agency were prepared to exercise religious identity flexibility. They expressed the view that while adopting a multi-religious approach to Religion Education, they could still remain committed to their personal religious identity. By and large these were student teachers who had been raised in homes that were tolerant of religious diversity and whose personal religious identity included a respectful attitude towards religions other than their own. These students did not experience discomfort when adopting a multi-religious approach to Religion Education. They made the following comments about their position:

> Nosipho: Every individual or religious group should be free and do what their religious group says. They should follow their own principles which are being said by their God.

> Jabu: Everyone has the right to speak about what they believe and should not be threatened. Learning from views and practices of other religions does not mean one would stay away from their own religion.

> Ncami: I will be able to facilitate Religion Education because I am not compromising my salvation, but merely educating learners about the different religions of the world and South Africa.

> Angela: My religion…won't cause me to compromise what I know to be truth or try to enforce my view on others.

Angela went on to say that she would approach Religion Education in such a way as to,

> expose learners to all views so as to promote diversity and acceptance/tolerance of others without causing them to fear or conform to a specific way.

Several student teachers in this category indicated that while they wished to do so, they felt ill equipped to facilitate a multi-religious approach to Religion Education because of a lack of knowledge. They expressed the need to become religiously literate, by acquiring knowledge about various religious traditions and practices.

Bheki said:

> I need more information and resources to facilitate Religion Education in the classroom.

This comment was supported by Rose who indicated that there were some things in certain religions with which she was unfamiliar. Priya stated that she knew very little about religions, including her own, and expressed the need to engage in research about different religions.

It was my observation, after having probed these student teachers further in the semi-structured focus group interview, that, by and large, while they were comfortable with adopting a multi-religious approach to Religion Education, they did so primarily for the purposes of being constitutionally correct. By doing so they could satisfy themselves that they were meeting the directives of the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003). This could however lead to a superficial approach to Religion Education. Although the students expressed an interest in learning about different religions, this could simply translate into little more than marking every religious holy day and special event, and simply teaching-learning *about* (my emphasis) religion. For the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003) to be implemented effectively, meaningful, empathetic inter[8]- and intra- religious[9] engagement needs to take

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[8] To broaden knowledge about different religions when individuals of different religious traditions are in contact with one another within the same context.

[9] To allow for critical inquiry and interaction between groups/denominations of the same religion.

place within the ambit of Religion Education. For this to happen, I argue that student teachers need to negotiate their personal religious identity and adopt an empathetic[10]-reflective-dialogical[11] approach to Religion Education.

Religious Identity and an Empathetic-reflective-dialogical Approach to Religion Education

Student teachers who adopted a position of religious identity flexibility were satisfied to simply know *about* religions other their own and adopt an inclusive, multi-religious approach to Religion Education. I argue that this approach would not necessarily deal with prejudice, suspicion, fear and stereotyping in the Religion Education classroom. In order to do so student teachers would need to be rationally and emotionally mature enough to engage with religious systems other than their own without compromising their own personal religious identity. It would mean being comfortable with their own religious identity and their own religious discourse and sufficiently secure therein so as to be able to empathically investigate the practice and traditions of other religions represented in their classrooms and in society as a whole. While not having to compromise their personal religious identity, student teachers should be able to take account the rights of others to hold different religious identities which, while different, are of equal value to those who hold them. It would necessitate the ability to dispel a 'belief in the superiority of a particular [religion] leading to prejudice and antagonism toward people of other [religions]' (Baez 2000: 330). It would mean being able to approach a religion other than their own respecting that this is sacred ground to those who are adherents/devotees/believers/followers in that particular religion.

It is my contention that Initial Teacher Education Life Orientation modules preparing student teachers to teach Religion Education can play a

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[10] Empathy is described by Abdool and Drinkwater (2005) as more than just knowledge about another person's religion. It is the capacity to understand and respond to the religious experiences of another person with an increased awareness of that person's thoughts and feelings.

[11] Roux (2007).

pivotal role in equipping student teachers to adopt an empathetic-reflective-dialogical approach to teaching-learning Religion Education. Safe spaces (cf. Roux 2012) could be created within Life Orientation modules for student teachers to interrogate their own biography with regard to religion and to identify the practices and traditions which influence those beliefs. The opportunity could also be provided for student teachers to reflect on their attitudes towards those who hold beliefs that are different to their own. By doing so they will be afforded the opportunity for the expression of their own opinions as well as taking into consideration the ideas of others. This dialogical approach, as students share their personal religious narratives, should be about searching for meaning and understanding (Allen 2004). It should be about recognizing that each person has 'something of value to contribute; it is opening [up] to the possibility of learning from the other' (Ipgrave 2001: 7). Even amongst those that share a common religious identity there could well be differences in interpretation and practice. Dialogical activity recognises the individuality of religious thinking and provides an opportunity to explore this.

MacIntyre and Dunne (2002) introduce the notion of narrative unity. This takes place when student teachers meet each other simply as individuals and not as representatives of one religion or another, and listen to one another's stories and grow in understanding of their own and of one another's traditions. Interaction of this nature provides the opportunity for student teachers to put their own beliefs into parenthesis (Jackson 1997) so as to adopt an impartial yet empathetic approach to the beliefs of others. If, as maintained by Allen (2004), dialogue has the potential to be emancipatory and transformational for those involved, then student teachers emerging from it are likely to be less fearful of compromising their own religious identity (often the root of religious identity paralysis or religious identity paradox) and more able to engage with confidence in situations of religious diversity. This process begins with the acceptance of diversity (religious identity flexibility). However, this needs to progress to a place of being open to diversity and willing to engage with difference and learn from others.

I advocate that when student teachers have successfully negotiated their religious identity they are able to employ an empathetic-reflective-dialogical approach in the Religion Education classroom that will provide learners with safe spaces in which to express their own beliefs, as well as

empathetically take into consideration the beliefs of other learners. It is at this point that meaning will be added to any multi-religious approach to Religion Education as advocated by the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003).

Religious identity paralysis and religious identity paradox are ineffective and even religious identity flexibility is not the ideal. The prototype Religion Education teacher is the one who has undergone a process of religious identity negotiation. According to my reading and analysis of the data there were no student teachers in this study who fell into this category. It is my intention to revisit the Life Orientation module that I teach and to provide the opportunity for student teachers in the future, to reflectively and dialogically engage with their religious identity.

Conclusion

In the domain of religion, the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003) has presented both challenges and opportunities with regard to policy image and personal religious identity. Initial Teacher Education Life Orientation modules need to create safe spaces for student teachers to explore their own religious identity whilst also developing a religious literacy and religious empathy that will enable them to engage with a context of religious diversity. Various aspects and issues of religions can be brought into a mode of critical dialogue. However, for this to be successful, student teachers need to acquire the necessary skills and be encouraged to think reflectively and critically about their particular standpoints and positions in respect of religious diversity, as they negotiate their religious identity. They need to be given the time and safe spaces in which to explore their religious identity 'baggage' (Samuel & Stephens 2000: 488). Drawing on Samuel and Stephens (2000) I suggest that what Life Orientation student teachers, soon to be first year in-service teachers, carry with them into the classroom, verbally and non-verbally, formally and informally, will contribute to the Religion Education experiences of future generations.

The religious identity of student teachers can play a pivotal role in their classroom practice as they either entrench discrimination on the basis of religion or promote religious dialogue as advocated by the *Religion and Education Policy* (2003). The opportunity for student teachers to reflectively

and dialogically engage with their religious identities in Initial Teacher Education Life Orientation modules could well pave the way to transformative teaching-learning of Religion Education in which student teachers encourage their learners to not only grow in their own religious beliefs but also to empathetically respect the religious beliefs of others in society.

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