

# Religion Education as Praxis: Voices and Narratives on Teaching and Learning Experiences

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## Abstract

The increasing importance of Religion in Education (RiE<sup>1</sup>) is reflected in many national and international forums and research projects. Many teacher education students have to traverse the boundaries of their own religious, cultural and social contexts to participate in liberal academic discourses and explore the distinctive field of study of and research in RiE. This article presents the original and full narratives of two postgraduate students of their paradigmatic transformation as a result of becoming acquainted with the epistemology of teaching and learning religion in education<sup>2</sup>. Their reflections provide an opportunity for critical elaborations and commentaries on the content and teaching strategies introduced in the undergraduate module. The narratives also recount the story of their journey to becoming postgraduate students and young researchers. In the second part of the article the lecturer, as mediator of teaching and learning, reflects on their narratives. This is done within a feminist research paradigm using narration and reflexivity to engage in self-critical sympathetic introspection and autoethnography as outlined and described in Roux (2007c) as a means of exploring the students' experiences of religious diversity and its impact on RiE.

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<sup>1</sup>Religion in Education (RiE) in this article should also be read as *multireligion education modules* in teacher training.

<sup>2</sup> The narrators who participated in this project are: Shan Simmonds and Ezanne Strydom.

**Keywords:** Narratives, Religion in Education (RiE), student teachers, teaching and learning, experiences, young researchers.

## **Introduction**

Over the past ten years in South Africa, most postgraduate students in RiE at tertiary institutions have been lecturers at Faculties of Education or tertiary religious seminaries. The PhD students currently enrolled in postgraduate research are mostly lecturers in teaching positions at their own tertiary institution. Very few BEd-honours, MEd or PhD students are doing research in RiE at Faculties of Education. This research field is clearly underrepresented in educational research, with little prospect of students becoming researchers and/or academics/lecturers. Evidence of this is that at some tertiary institutions there is no interest in making provision for research in this field at postgraduate level. At a few teacher training tertiary institutions, undergraduate year-modules and main subjects have even been reduced to semester courses. This ignores the implications of the Policy Document on Religion Education (2003), which stipulates very clearly that RiE is an important core part of the National Curriculum Statement of South African schools and the *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (2001). The need for qualified teachers in primary and secondary education demands that there be appropriate undergraduate modules taught by specialists in the field. In addition, there is a need for students with the propensity to become postgraduate students: research projects in RiE<sup>3</sup> are vital and to become 'qualified' lectures and scholars at tertiary institutions. It seems that Faculties of Education and/or Theology and Religious Studies in South Africa have not taken account of the high profile the field enjoys at universities in other parts of the world.

During the past six years, the main author of this article has found that students who were high academic achievers were interested in becoming

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<sup>3</sup> Many tertiary institutions abroad deliver appropriate numbers of postgraduate students and are involved in projects on Religion Education, e.g. The *Warwick Religion Education Research Unit* at the University of Warwick (Britain); and the work being done at the Faculty of Education (University of Hamburg, Germany). Many other examples can be given.

postgraduate students in Religion Education. Three of these students, for example, were *cum laude* students in their respective BEd programmes and achievers of vice-chancellor's and other academic undergraduate and postgraduate awards. They also received international bursaries<sup>4</sup>, prestige bursaries from the tertiary institution as well as from parastatal institutions like the National Research Foundation (NRF) to do their postgraduate studies. There can be no question of these students' ability to become highly effective and successful postgraduate students and researchers. The undergraduate module on RiE, which was a compulsory module at a particular SA University, has been taught since 1994. The students who shared their narratives enrolled as first year-students in 2004. They started a year after the National Policy Document on Religion Education (September 2003) was implemented by the South African Department of Education (DoE).

### **The Research Question and Assignment**

Socio-historical contextualization of RiE is important for religion educators and researchers. One needs to understand one's own frame of reference and the way in which research and teaching and learning in religion is constituted. With this in mind, research questions were posed to BEd-honours students who wanted to do further study the following academic year. The assignment was to write a narrative on their own religious, cultural and social contexts and to present theoretically grounded arguments for partaking in projects or further research in this field of study.

These two questions were posed:

- How do teacher-education students who want to enrol in postgraduate studies cross boundaries set by their own religious, cultural and social contexts.

And:

- How do teacher-education students engage in liberal academic discourses and explore the distinctive field of study of and research in RiE?

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The two students chosen for the project had presented their narratives as a paper at a national academic conference during their BEd-honours year. In my theoretical underpinning of the research, I took the stance, as defined by Elliot (2006) that the validity of the narrative depends in part on the research question when it addresses issues of the social and cultural world in which the person lives. The academic culture and environment in the class created by the analyser and specific events in the students' undergraduate study year, rather than a response over a lengthy period, was the key element.

The students' papers were exceptionally well received by senior academics and this compelled me, their lecturer, to reflect on and analyse their narratives from a feminist research paradigm, employing narration and reflexivity that engage a self-critical sympathetic introspection and autoethnography. (Roux 2007c:508). The theory embraces personal reflections on the remarks and an understanding of one's own ontological meaning of life with *reflexivity* as an important part of understanding the social construct of one's own experiences and insight about the 'other'.

## **Narrative as a Process for Assessing an Introspection and Autoethnography**

One can argue that a narrative gives cohesion to our lives and our culture where one can recall one's history of peoples and ideas in 'popular tales'. Narratives open a way of imagination to the world and can awaken new sensibilities to approach the past, present and future.

Narratives in social sciences have been used to connect events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole (cf. Abbott 2002; Elliot 2006). According to Hinchman and Hinchman (1997:xvi),

[N]arratives in human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it.

One should argue that there is a true and authentic voice in which we can gain access to understand the epistemology, processes and reasons which

results in ‘a change of meaning and judgements that can be communicated’ (Elliot 2006:9). I take the view of Elliot (2006:39) that sociological insights can be gained from the narratives and that the two narratives elaborate on the social context in which they were produced and reflect on the processes involved (Song 1998:104).

I also argue that a hermeneutic approach needs to be adopted in social sciences and narratives, especially in RiE. One needs to develop a detailed understanding of how the participants make sense of the world in which they live (Ricoeur 1981; Elliot 2006; Roux 2007b; Jessop & Penny 1999). It is an ever-changing process of giving priority to and understanding the production of the social world. The narrative reflects previous cohesion in our lives and our culture, religions and belief systems. Narratives make it possible to understand the history of peoples, their popular stories and ideals. Narratives also awaken new sensibilities to the past, present and future. It creates opportunities to explore the meanings of concepts and distinctions for individuals so they can examine the way in which they may be evoked or resisted, as well as experience a variety of social settings and experiences. It is a way for the students to make sense of their experience, construct the self, and create and communicate meaning of academic experiences (Chase 2003; Josselson, Lieblich & McAdams 2003). The academic setting of the students in the BEd Programme in Religion in Education, also called Religion Studies<sup>5</sup> was particularly appropriate because it presented new experiences and challenges.

In analysing the two narratives, I adopt the approach that the social construct of the participants is vital. Elliot (2006) argues that the importance of the narrative for social constructs should also be understood to constitute individual identities. Narrative-based research focuses on the individual’s subjective interpretations and the meanings they make of their lives. Life stories locate, display, evaluate and impart information to social sciences (Baerger & McAdams 1999; Clough 2002). These ontological narratives can

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<sup>5</sup> The content of Religion Studies in the programme is more academic than the requirements set for content in outcomes 2 of the Life Orientation Learning Area. *Religion Studies* is a year module on RiE from a multireligious, theoretical and practical perspective based on current international and national tendencies and empirical research.

also help students in teacher education, especially in RiE, to compile and define the multiple identities and roles of teachers in education (Doyle & Carter 2003; Smit & Fritz 2008; Jessop & Penny 1999). This argument is especially applicable to postgraduate students who are becoming young researchers in RiE.

## **Two Narratives**

The two narratives will be presented with the theoretical underpinning selected by the students for their respective narratives. These narratives were individually constructed to the extent that each individual had no influence on the other's reflection. They thus provide an opportunity for each student to 'describe how "their" lives take on meaning through the means by which they are told and retold' (Bruner 1987:13) through their reflections from the time of being a student to becoming a young researcher in RiE.

The students' narratives and self-reflections will be given in full and in their own language and writing style, before I continue my argument and reflect critically within a feminist research paradigm, using narration and reflexivity to engage in self-critical sympathetic introspection and autoethnography (Roux 2007c). The reason for not presenting a summary of the narratives is to present the reader with a full description of the students' own research journey. I am also of the opinion that this approach embraces the feminist research paradigm of autoethnography.

The first narrative identifies how pre-service teachers as individuals progress and grow in terms of different phases identified according to Boutte's (1999) and Roux's (2005) stages of multicultural growth. The student re-interprets these stages of multicultural education within multireligion education (Religion in Education). Prominence is placed on the value of multireligion and how RiE impacted on her pre-service teacher training. She also reflects on how the facilitation strategies influenced her to do postgraduate studies. The second narrative argues firstly that pre-service teachers should make a *paradigm shift* from Religious Education to Religion in Education (Religious Studies in Education), and secondly emphasises the importance and relevance of RiE.

## **Narration and Autoethnography (Student A)**

I was privileged to do a BEd programme at a tertiary institution in which the Religion Studies module (multireligious education) was presented in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year.

- *My perceptions on the module content and relevance*

When this module commenced all students received study guides containing relevant, core information. We started off exploring ‘religion as a study of science’; clarifying concepts such as fundamentalism; the insider-outsider debate and the paradigm shift teachers need to make in teaching and learning religion. We studied six religions practised in South Africa (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and African Religion), their histories; theories; structures; beliefs; curriculum theories; teaching and learning theories; religious and spiritual development etc. (Read, Rudge, Teece & Howarth 1992:9). The study guide thus contextualised the theory of what I believe represent current relevant and appropriate beliefs and practices. These beliefs and practices are influential in the modern world and at the same time form part of a coherent system or worldview. I argue that it is much easier to give expression and to relate to the theory than using theory that is irrelevant in today’s society. The structure and design of the module made it evident that all the content, included in the module was relevant and ‘closely linked’ so that the correct conclusions could be drawn (Read *et al.* 1992:9). I found that the content made me want to read more.

- *My experiences of Religion Studies and a description of the phase developments I discovered*

My confused perception of Religion Studies in Education (multireligious education) meant that I was taken aback by our first formal lecture. Roux (2006:1294) states that ‘encouraging students to explore the phenomena of religion may inflict a feeling of disillusionment, especially if they are from an exclusively monoreligious environment’. Studying and understanding other religions, emphasizing descriptive historical facts rather than spiritual growth and the exploration of a faith by which to live may be part of this disillusionment. I felt a sense of fear and doubtfulness during the first lecture. Fear in this instance can be defined as fearing that in multireligious

education the content would disturb my own religious beliefs. Doubtfulness was closely connected to this fear—the reason being that I feared that if I experienced these feelings, what would the response of the learners that I would have to teach be. I argue that I did not feel secure nor did I have any self-confidence with regard to this module,

[F]eeling safe is one of the most important aspects to be considered when any multireligion content is presented in a classroom. As religion is an emotive topic, it should be clear that in a school environment where different religions are facilitated, reactions and questions should be put across concerning the issue of feeling safe and secure (Roux 2006:1299-1300).

I wish to explore the arguments above in association with Bouttes's (1999) stages of multicultural growth, adapted by Roux (2005). These arguments can be described and related to *Phase One* of these stages. In this phase one defines the emotional response of the learner to differences as being fearful, with perhaps even a sense of rejection, still taking the view that we are all the same. Therefore the religiosity<sup>6</sup> of other person(s) had not yet influenced the perception of my own being, not to change me but to enable me to understand. I still struggled with the fact that 'my perception is the only one that is correct' (Boutte 1999:29). Consequently, according to Boutte (1999), I was taking a risk, even while still deciding if I would let this module and the content change my perceptions.

As the class progressed over a few months I started to feel more comfortable, but not safe as yet. My changing perceptions of other teacher-students within the classroom motivated me to be more interested in my classmates' beliefs systems and religious convictions. As a person, I always thought that I knew my religious background relatively well, but I obviously had not taken note of the other student-teachers around me and their

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<sup>6</sup> 'Religiosity' can be described as a state of being affectedly or extremely pious; sanctimoniously religious. However according to Roux (2007a:112) there is also as a wider element of understanding involved. 'Religiosity' can in RiE also be understood as the holistic approach of a person towards religion.



perceptions of their belief systems and religious convictions. Now I began to realise that not only do we have a diverse society, but this diverse society is present within the lecturer room. I could, in retrospect, deal with diversity to some extent and during my teaching practice I managed with ease within a multireligious and multicultural school. But when I had to facilitate religious or spiritual component I tended to be avoid dealing with it properly, hoping that the learners would not engage into a discussion that embraces religious or spiritual components. My argument is that I had the knowledge about religions in theory but had never engaged with these at first hand. The reason for not engaging could be that I was scared of interaction and of answering questions. This according to Boutte (1999:29) places me in the second phase of multicultural growth, where my perception was now of being one of many. My emotional response then to these differences, which still existed, was that of interest, awareness and openness. I therefore wanted to research and learn more about other religions (theories and social contexts). I can argue that this feeling personally enriched me.

As explained, I felt more comfortable as the months progressed. The decisive moment came after the class took a research excursion to different places of worship. I came to realise that as an educator and citizen of a diverse society, I need to know the theories of other religions and be able to appreciate and become actively involved with them. Boutte (1999:27) argues that unless educators are willing to examine and change their attitudes, multicultural (multireligious) education will not be effective. In other words the research excursion made it possible to place all theory in perspective, consequently changing my attitude, towards other religions. This research excursion made me feel connected towards the teaching of the content of the module. The reason for using the expression *connected* and not *emotional* would be that you can connect to a situation without being emotional thus the connectedness or rather within this example a sense of perceptive understanding came when we visited the Madrassa school. While we were at the school, we watched the educators' teaching and learning their learners about Islam and being a Muslim. I, as an educator, could connect to them although this was a different context—the religious school setting as opposed to a public school. After this research excursion, we were expected to do a semester assignment. We had to design lesson plans and integrate all of the knowledge we already had about other religions (Roux 2007a). This started

to interest me to such an extent that a colleague and I put questionnaires together and conducted a small-scale empirical study on how different principles in schools interpreted Religion Education within the school curriculum. I can now argue that I had reached *Phase three* according to Boutte (1999:29). He describes this phase as (the) perception that is busy changing and improving, the emotional response towards these differences is now of respect, appreciation and enthusiasm. For the first time I felt equipped to learn from other religions and to engage actively in acquiring more knowledge of other religions.

- *The value of this exercise for me as a pre-service teacher*

The module has had lasting value for me as an individual and pre-service teacher. It taught me about religions, other than the one that I practised, existed and made me an extended professional<sup>7</sup> towards diversity within the society even if I did not feel I could achieve this in the beginning:

one can assume that (student-teachers) professional abilities will increasingly come to the fore as they gain more experience through practice and as they gain knowledge (Roux 2007a:120).

I also felt that I had been equipped with the necessary knowledge and so gained the ability to teach learners with confidence about other religions. I was not only able to respect learners of different religious persuasions, but to enable learners to treat each other with respect. My perception towards diversity changed immensely and I could relate to other people by feeling connected to them as we '*are all the same*'. It made me realise how important it is to understand and treat people with respect within society: knowing that it makes a big difference for learners to feel respected and accepted within society. Read *et al.* (1992:4) describe this in these terms: 'The focus is therefore on religion as a living and contemporary aspect of life, rather than as a subject for purely historical study'. I argue that Religion in Education taught me to apply values in our diverse society: values such as

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<sup>7</sup> Educators relying on their rationality just as much as on their intuition; and who value theory as important to their practice. Du Preez (cited Evans 2002:124).

empathy, respect and accountability. As Read *et al.* (1992:3) argue, as [students] mature, it is important that they assume responsibility for themselves and for their own actions, that they act in a responsible way towards each other and that they are given the opportunity to reflect on the important spiritual and moral questions they will encounter.

- *Facilitation strategies that have influenced my journey*

The facilitating strategies<sup>8</sup> used in class were exceptional. Read *et al.* (1992:3) emphasize that the teacher of Religious Education should be concerned to encourage and promote an open, critical and sympathetic approach to the subject. This implies that the teacher will require just those qualities in his or her approach. It is an approach based on a willingness to enquire and to raise questions without necessarily arriving at firm and conclusive answers. At the same time it requires a commitment to the value and the importance of the enquiry, and conviction that it is worthwhile for the teacher as well as for the educator.

The lecturer at the tertiary institution that taught us, had just these above mentioned qualities, she encouraged an environment of openness, empathy, respect and responsibility towards the module. Her commitment towards and knowledge of the content of the module were impeccable. I felt I could trust her and her knowledge. Roux (2007a:120-121) argues that you as a lecturer should take the religious development phases of the student teacher into account, and it is of great importance to foster a healthy relationship between the lecturer and the students in this module: responsible presentation of multireligious programme is absolutely essential.

I was thus strongly influenced by my lecturer. To help the pre-service student teachers overcome fears and negative perceptions towards the study of religions other than their own, positive motivation and encouragement are imperative in assisting them to make a paradigm shift. Although the lecturer provoked us into responding by introducing controversial arguments, she always remained positive, motivating and encouraging the class to engage constructively in debate. With this being said

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<sup>8</sup> These facilitation strategies can be seen as discussions, debates, co-operative learning, reflections, extra reading and discussions on articles and policies.

it brings me to another facilitation strategy that influenced me immeasurably.

Discussion and debate played a big role within the class, the arguments and opinions formulated between students were of great value. The lecturer led these discussions and debates in a particular direction so we could see the relevance of the arguments within the specific context. This context varied from issues of faith within the media to how should we respond to certain problems regarding religions within a classroom context. Thus, the arguments and perceptions formed during discussion and debates educated me to closely observe the point of views and perceptions of others. I saw the purpose of these experiences, which influenced me to view other people as human beings in their own right and to listen to them. In most cases it is possible to construct and extend one's own knowledge and form new arguments through listening to other people's arguments. Ferguson & Roux (2003:294) argue that, interaction should provide mediated learning that includes an intention by the lecturer (mediator) to assist the student to transcend his or her immediate needs or concerns.

Furthermore, the student should also understand how issues, activities or information are interconnected and become capable of transferring knowledge from one context to another (Feuerstein cited in Ferguson & Roux 2003:294).

I could also recognise the following strategies in our discussions and classes:

Mediation on intent occurs when the mediator deliberately guides interaction in a chosen direction by selected objects or topics and then focuses the students upon them. Mediation of intent would also include the purposeful sharing of the learning programme's goals by the tutor/mediator in such a way that the recipient of mediation responds as part of an interactive process (Ferguson & Roux 2003:293).

Another facilitation strategy that influenced me was the use of relevant academic articles. All of these articles related to religion and education were related to practice. As already mentioned the lecturer had a very good relationship with her students. Having an open-door policy, she always

made time to discuss these extra articles given to us, if needed. By reading about certain issues within religion and education in more depth, I gained so much knowledge and insight that I wanted to know more. Consequently, it influenced me to study further and to read more. Not only did the reading influence me, but also the knowledge and enthusiasm of the lecturer influenced me to want to know more thus reading and then to study further.

### **Narration and Autoethnography (Student B)**

My contribution in this narrative is to explore reflection-for-action and reflection-on-action as I have experienced it. ‘*Reflection-For-Action*’ entails for me ‘reflection before the anticipated experience occurs’ (Killion & Todnem 1991 in Fallon & Brown 2002:39) where as *Reflection-On-Action*’ draws on the idea of ‘reflection after the moment’ (Schon 1983 in Fallon & Brown 2002:39).

- *Reflection-for action*

My first impression as a student was that the compulsory module, Religion Studies in Education presented in the third year of my study, was going to be what many students refer to as a ‘*free*’ period. This resulted from my interpretation of this module as being one in which bible stories and relevant religious festivals would be discussed, and where we would not actually have to think critically or apply content knowledge. It should be remembered that my perception was based on a monoreligious outlook, namely Christianity, and limited by my monocultural ideals and upbringing. It could perhaps be said that my view of this module was two-fold. It involved the idea of Religious Education<sup>9</sup> and not Religion Education<sup>10</sup> or Religion in Education

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<sup>9</sup> **Religious Education** is about nurturing a religious consciousness and some believe this is the duty of a specific religion through their religious institutions (churches and mosques, for example) (*Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* 2001:43).

<sup>10</sup> **Religion Education** aims to provide knowledge about different religions with the intention to create a deeper sense of self-realisation and a broader civil toleration of others (*Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* 2001:45).

(RiE) as well as a preconceived idea of what was actually happening in schools.

This preconceived idea can be seen as related to the idea of heroes and holidays (Gordon 2004). Teachers might have the perception that Religion Studies in Education (multicultural and multireligious education) is about teaching learners about festive holidays such as Human Rights Day, Christmas and Hanukkah as well as celebrating heroes on public holidays. Therefore the misconception that ‘many people first think of lessons in human relations and sensitivity training, units about ethnic holidays, education in inner-city schools, or food festivals’ (Nieto 2000) underpinned my understanding. Such a view of multicultural and Religion in Education (multireligious education) creates a profound misconception about its meaning and purpose. This resulted in people (such as myself) being totally convinced that one can adequately promote multiculturalism by celebrating cultural diversity and food festivals.

- *Reflection-on action*

I was taken aback by the content that was presented in the module material, when we were first presented with our ‘*yellow books*’. My inexperienced nature got the better of me when it became clear exactly how much there was for teachers to consider about Religion Education (multireligious and multicultural education). The vocabulary on its own required a mind shift and the terms presented in the content slowly became overwhelming. My paradigm shift began when I recognised the necessity for change to take place as ‘a new way of thinking about old problems’ (Roux 1998:85). This shift led to new insights and explanations which resulted in distancing me from my original perception of this module as a ‘free’ period and waste of time. Rather, it led me to become more and more inquisitive and interested. This was further re-enforced by the realization that

looking into the future from one’s old paradigms will not help to shape the future, but will filter other incoming experiences in such a way that creative thinking may not take place and opportunities may not be grasped (Roux 1998:85).

As a result, I began to spend more of my time debating with BEd 3 *outsiders*<sup>11</sup> on their opinions and views on for example, religious fundamentalism and the insider/outsider theory of understanding religions and Religion Education. This created an opportunity for me to explore people's diverse perceptions and, together with this, create my own knowledge and understanding through the implementation of alternative patterns or models of solving problems. In this way, shifting away from the boundaries of my 'old' paradigms, in the hope to generate 'new' insight and enlightenment, further guided my development as a future educator in a diverse South Africa.

We were given two very interesting assignments to complete during the module. This led me to explore what was happening in schools. A colleague and I went to a Waldorf school and various monoreligious and multireligious schools in the region, where we conducted interviews and completed questionnaires with school principals or heads of departments. We wanted to explore relevant educational aspects we identified such as what educators currently view as the educational goals of the learning area, Life Orientation. I set out to find whether my theoretical BEd 3 module was actually realised in practice in the schools' curriculum. I adopted the view of

shifting to a more balanced approach of teaching, which places more emphasis on understanding subject matter, (where pre-service) teachers must learn more about the subjects they intend to teach, and how students learn these subjects (Garet, Porter & Desimone 2001:916).

Garer *et al.* (2001:916) also state that '... [T]he continual deepening of knowledge and skills is an integral part of any profession'. This further emphasised the necessity for us to explore the practical world of teaching as a means of reflecting on a fundamental and integral part of deepening our

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<sup>11</sup> **An outsider** in this context refers to any individual who is not part of my own BEd 3 year student-group—thus any individual who does not study with me.

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knowledge. The experience proved to be remarkable in the sense that the schools were accommodating and generously shared their ideas. It created an atmosphere for us, as students, where we could reflect on and further explore the link of what we were studying in the module and what was actually happening in the schools.

I took a personal interest in studying the different religions. The detailed information became relevant for me, not only as part of making provision for our so-called ‘rainbow nation’, but also as meeting the requirements stipulated in the National Curriculum Statement and Policy. It also became contextualized in the framework of values, morals, human rights and the important role it contributed to create and promote respect and tolerance for all persons, irrespective of their religious or cultural beliefs. For the first time in my experience as a pre-service teacher, the *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (2001) featured specifically in this module in the BEd-programme. This put into perspective the need for values in the curriculum and to

inculcate a sense of values at schools intended to help young people achieve higher levels of moral judgement. [Recognition] that education does not exist simply to serve the market, but to serve society, and that means instilling in pupils and students a broad sense of values (*Manifesto* 2001:iv).

I internalised the ways in which the *Manifesto* suggested ways of promoting the values of the South African Constitution (1996) through the educational system, and especially introducing Religion Education in schools. I think I can concur that I could successfully recognize the significance and the need for understanding other religious and cultural education in schools. I grew in my relationships towards others as I developed a new found respect for people belonging to religions and cultures other than my own.

During the visits (research excursions) to various religious places of worship, I discovered the ways each religious institution created a safe environment, where I could feel comfortable to ask questions and share my ideas. The pictures in my memory of the experience of being in a Temple and reaching an understanding of the complex principle of the Deities in



Hinduism seemed to be uncomplicated; I found them fascinating. When asked to compile a self-reflection journal of my experiences of this research excursion, I found my responses very different from my original approach towards religions. We were invited to explore and interact with teachers and learners in the Madressa-school at a Mosque, where the children recited scriptures and the teachers demonstrated their teaching ability. This allowed me to connect with them professionally, although I am an outsider to their religion. There was a common element of sharing education (teaching and learning). In this regard, I recognised the educational value that this experience created for me to relate to the *understanding* taking place in practice. I appreciated the different religious ways of life; what they are and the role they play in society. I could no longer be prejudiced and critical, but recognised the need to be more reflective. This encouraged me to relate my experiences and reflections gained through the religious research excursion to my role as a pre-service educator and maybe researcher. It began to give meaning to the notion of ‘understanding theory through praxis’ (Roux 2006:213)

There was a massive amount of content in this module, which made the exam a big challenge. The knowledge that I gained served me well when I taught religion in the Life Orientation learning area during my school practices.

I also spent a great deal of time observing teachers teaching religion as part of Life Orientation. I identified successes and failures and this encouraged me to investigate approaches to teaching religion during my school practices. While developing my own lessons, I combined content knowledge and research I had done as part of independent study of teaching and learning theories and curriculum development. I thus gained new skills and knowledge which guided my practice in the classroom.

## **Reflections on our Narratives (Students A & B)**

In reflecting on our attempts to write reflexive narratives of our experience as student-teachers of the Religion Studies in Education module, we noted some of the main differences between our narratives. As young researchers, we also pose the following question to our readers: *How important is it to*

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*take notice of the different stages of multicultural religion growth and the paradigm shifts that pre-service teachers have to make?*

- Is it sufficient to have an individual with the right mindset to teach Religion Education or do we need to take the pluralistic society in consideration?
- How would taking notice of the different stages of growth and the paradigm shifts pre-service teachers have to undergo help to meet the need for appropriate Religion Education in the South African schools?

We would like to explore these questions further as part of our journey as postgraduate students and young researchers.

## **An Analysis of the Two Narratives**

### **Position of the Analyser**

I was the senior researcher and also the lecturer presenting the Religion Studies module in teacher education. One can argue that this double role influences the analyser's position (Smit & Fritz 2008:98). Ribbon & Edwards (1998) state that there is a tension and discomfort, but also a source of insight being an observer and listener.

We may thus shift uneasily between the position of participant and observer/listener, constantly reflecting upon how we know about things and how we view knowledge produced (Ribbon & Edwards 1998:2).

This insight informed my role as analyser of the students' narratives as I sought to gain insight into their experiences and perceptions. It was clear from the narratives that the students' gained knowledge on religious diversity during the year. After reflection, I decided not to analyse the processes of the narratives but to concentrate on the progression of knowledge construction for becoming young researchers in RiE.

## **Evaluation, Analyses and Meaning of the Narratives**

There are a number of different approaches to analysing narratives. Labov & Waletzky (1967), for instance, describe three viewpoints from which to analyse narratives, namely meaning, structure and performance. *Meaning* defines the content, chronological as well as evaluative, depicting the experiences of narratives in the students' lives. The *structure* is the way in which the story is put together and the *performance* is the interactional and institutional context in which the narratives are produced, recounted and consumed.

In the case of this research, the form and structure of the narratives were not important: the assignment essentially represents the theoretical notions of the students' own journey. It was interesting to note that they start their narratives with their experiences on the first day in the Religion Studies in Education class. Both students express their feelings about and perceptions of the content of the subject, as well as the outline of the content, amount of work and academic standard. It is clear that the students' expectations of the subject and real experiences differ immensely from the expected outcomes of the subject.

Leiblich Tuval-Maschaich and Zilber (1998) see narrative research as focusing on *content* or *form*. It suggests a holistic analysis in understanding the individuals' way of putting the narrative together. A holistic analysis preserves the narrative in its entirety and understands its complete entity. Categorical analysis (Elliot 2006 38), on the other hand, is when the text is classified and placed in categories. In the case of this research, a holistic approach was used to analyse the narratives. Students were expected to narrate their personal journey in the form of an academic exercise. The two aspects of the assignment have different theoretical underpinnings, but form a unit when put together.

Linde (1993:163) sees beliefs and relations between beliefs in terms of a *coherence system*. The coherence system provides extra resources for creating narratives' linkages and allows 'causal connections that would not be available using common sense'. It is a useful means of placing the individual within specific historical and cultural contexts. It also offers a means of developing a better understanding of the link between expert forms of coherence systems and their popular offshoots. Each narrative describes the student's individual connection with her research journey within her own

specific historical and cultural context. The narratives also provide the connections between their research journey and their understanding of theory and praxis. At the same time, they reflect their personal feelings and their exploration of their growing professionalism as teachers in training. Both narratives give a holistic and coherent view of the influences of teaching and learning RiE.

The two narratives can also be seen as a form of *impressionistic tale* (Van Maanen 1988:102). My reasoning is that both these students, in order to meet the assignment, had to interpret and articulate their narratives from a theoretical point of view. In *Narrative One* the student reflects and interprets her own growth within the different stages of growth in multicultural education and interprets it from her religious context (Boutte 1999; Roux 2005). The narrator defines her own growth and understanding of differences as 'being the same'. This opens a new debate on understanding 'the other'. In many publications on understanding *the other* (Du Preez 2008; Levinas 2006; Roux 2007c) scholars gave philosophical and theoretical accounts and empirical analyses of the need to understand individuals who differ from one's religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This understanding of *the other* seems to be more important when teachers as agents need to facilitate Religion Education, world-views and values; and where there should be a deliberate openness and sincerity to diversity and the plural make-up of students in their classrooms. This argument may also apply to this young researcher. We are inherently not all the same and to only focus on sameness denies the immense challenges that we encounter, not because of sameness, but because of diversity.

In *Narrative Two* the student recalls her first expressions at the beginning of the study year and explores *reflection-for-action* and *reflection-in-action* in RiE as two theoretical notions to describe the processes to become a young researcher.

An *interpretative analysis* of the narrative aims at understanding how the subjects make sense of events and experiences and require descriptive contexts (Eliot 2006:37). One of the issues in analysing and understanding narratives is that researchers are seeking to explore 'privately' based knowledge and personal understandings, and then reconstitute them within publicly based disciplinary knowledge (Ribbens & Edwards 1998:13). Ribbens and Edwards (1998) used the term 'privately'

and I found it applicable for the argument on how the students' personal experiences on their own religious stance on this module became 'public knowledge' in their narratives. The two students narrate the events and their experiences as well as the detailed contextual descriptions of their first encounter with the module in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year. They explore their journeys towards '*making sense*' of the new paradigm. In this regard they use different theoretical notions to depict their feelings, but in the process of reflexivity described their own interpretations. Their self-reflection reflects self-critical sympathetic introspection and autoethnography (Roux 2007c; Gatenby & Humphries 2000). They not only describe their feelings and discomfort with the religious content and new knowledge but also engage in their own interpretations of this new paradigm as they move towards a position where they reflect on both issues; the emotions and ontology. I want to argue that these narratives contribute to the two young researchers' understanding of their own development and identifying their multiple identities, and how these developed through their journey. It was clear that the students' approach was a response to what they thought, felt and concluded at the specific time and immediately after. *Narrative One* describes the student's feelings and journey, but also emphasises her concern with her own approach towards her learners in religion education during teaching practice. *Narrative Two* provides an insight into her own teaching and learning approaches during school practice as well as the observation of teachers' facilitation strategies. These observations, combined with her own school practice experiences, offer new insights and research opportunities for her in RiE. The fact that both students also initiated a small-scale research questionnaire indicates that they were able to combine theory with practice. I would argue that to grow and develop from student teachers to young researchers requires a specific comprehension, enquiring mind and ability to engage in different notions as delineated in the science of RiE. I noticed in both narratives a development of an enquiring mind and I experienced their determination to explore more than the third-year module had offered them.

Collaboration in an international research project (SANPAD: 2004-2009) explored also the identification of a 'feminist research paradigm with narration and reflexivity that engages a self-critical sympathetic introspection and autoethnography' (Roux 2007c). Experiences with women academics in this multireligious and multicultural project lasting five years led to a new

dimension of understanding reflexivity. Students should ensure continual self-critique through reflections, journals and narratives. Learning about oneself and identifying stereotypes and notions about another's religious and cultural experience can connect one to and offer insights into another religious or cultural way of life (Patton 2002; Roux 2007c).

I am arguing that these narratives also correspond with the *feminist element of narration* (Elliot 2006; Ribbens & Edwards 1998). Feminist scholars point out that the production of theory is also a social activity which is culturally, socially and historically embedded resulting in situated-knowledge (Harraway 1988:121). Reflexivity in writing is based on the realist tale (*narrative* = CDR) as described by Van Maanen thus: 'A realist tale offers one reading and culls its facts carefully to support that reading' (1988:52). Reflexivity reflects and couples an awareness of one's own identity. According to Elliot (2006:155), developing a reflexive awareness is to become open to new ways of writing and reading text. A researcher's creative reflexivity diverts attention away from the subjects and subject matter of research to the researcher's self. I argue that these students' reflexivity and understandings of their own personal, social and academic situated-knowledge and their autobiographies explicitly located them in relation to the academic content of the module and the facilitation strategies of the lecturer (Mauther & Doucet 1998:121; Ferguson & Roux 2003).

## **Conclusion**

Becoming a young researcher is a process that starts with one's first encounter with the subject and research terrain. In Religion Studies in Education and RiE, this process is complicated by the fact that the knowledge construction and ontology of RiE are disputed in academic circles, Faculties of Education and the public domain. Student teachers' experiences of religious diversity in Religious Studies in Education and RiE impacted directly on the education of society. The challenge is to be sensitive to diversity, given the dominance of one religion in education (schools) and in social orders (religious societies). Experience of Religion Studies in Education can transform students' lived experiences into public academic outputs. It is vital to respect the demands of creating an ethical teaching and learning environment. However, before being able to participate in the liberal

academic discourses, boundaries set by religious, cultural and social contexts have to be traversed. Research in the distinctive field of RiE requires a paradigmatic transformation to become acquainted with the epistemology of teaching and learning religion. This interplay between the epistemology and research practice needs further exploration and closer definition in order to facilitate the process of becoming a young researcher.

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