

The Voice of the Religion Education Teacher in the Context of Religious Diversity

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Abstract

In the domain of Religion Education the voice of the Religion Education (RE) teacher is crucial. This voice can either entrench religious discrimination or promote religious tolerance and dialogue. The findings of a recent empirical research project in selected KwaZulu-Natal primary schools provided evidence that the RE teacher's understanding of religious freedom is influenced by his/her biography and school context. This understanding finds expression in the RE teacher's voice which can choose to act in a way which is emancipatory and transformatory or not. It is important that a dialogical space is created for RE teacher's concerns to be voiced and heard.

Keywords: Religion Education, voice, religious freedom, agency and structure, transformation.

Introduction

South African teachers find themselves in religiously diverse classroom contexts. Inclusivity in a school context of religious diversity underpins the country's Religion and Education Policy (2003) which is informed by, and supportive of, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (CRSA) (1996). Legislators have made the assumption that teachers will unproblematically adopt a multi religious approach to Religion Education (RE). The findings of a recent empirical study (Jarvis 2008) demonstrated that this is not the case as teaching RE in religiously diverse contexts can be complex. The teacher's understanding of religious freedom needs to be taken

into account as well as tensions that can arise between the RE teacher's personal religious identity and their professional identity. The school context is another factor which needs to be considered.

In this article I argue for the importance of the RE teacher's voice. Their voice can be empowering and have a practical dimension whereby it can either promote or discourage an inclusive, multi religious approach to teaching RE. I argue further that RE teachers need to publicly express their opinions while also considering the ideas of others. In the next section I describe the study (Jarvis 2008) which explored the way in which in-service teachers of RE¹ constructed their understanding of the human right to religious freedom. The study contributed to a wider research project (Roux *et al.* 2006) focusing on understanding human rights.

Research Design and Methodology

The study was carried out in three purposively selected KwaZulu-Natal primary schools situated in the greater Durban area. The schools were selected in order to investigate three different school contexts in terms of demographics and resources. For the purposes of this article they will be referred to as schools A, B and C. School A was a well-resourced, sub-urban, former model C school with predominantly White and Indian learners, and which promoted a strong evangelical Christian ethos. School B was an under-resourced, peri-urban, former mission school comprising only Black² learners and which unapologetically promoted Catholicism. School C was a

¹ Although for the purposes of this article I, from hereon, refer to these teachers as 'RE teachers', they are in fact teachers of Life Orientation (LO), none of whom have been trained as LO specialist teachers. They teach RE because it falls within Outcome 2 of the LO curriculum, but like most teachers of LO in South Africa, they lack specific training and skills in teaching RE.

² It must be acknowledged that for some South African scholars the term 'Black' refers collectively to 'Africans', 'Indians' and 'Coloureds'. In this article, however 'Black' is used to refer to 'Africans'. 'Indians' and 'Whites' are called by those names. It must be noted that the researcher does not endorse these politically racial classifications, but uses them for expediency in describing the school contexts in which the research took place.

fairly well-resourced, sub-urban, former HoD³ school comprising both Indian and Black learners and which claimed to adopt a multi religious approach to RE.

I employed an exploratory case study approach to determine how the understanding of the human right to religious freedom was constructed and interpreted by teachers of Life Orientation (LO) in these schools. Male and female teachers of all race groups represented in the schools participated in the research, also young and fairly inexperienced teachers as well as older more experienced teachers. Teachers of Grade 4 - Grade 6 LO classes were requested to complete self administered questionnaires in which they expressed their understanding of religious freedom and the way in which they thought their biography and school context influenced their approach to teaching RE. The Grade 6 LO teachers were then invited to participate in semi structured focus group interviews during which I was able to probe further their responses to the questionnaires. In order to gain a better understanding of the school context and the school policy and management position with regard to religious freedom I conducted a semi structured individual interview with the principals in each of the three schools. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and augmented by extensive field notes. I analysed and synthesized the data I collected from the questionnaires and from the individual and focus group interviews and recorded my findings and interpretations.

Conceptual Framework

In this section I discuss the conceptual framework which served as the lens through which I viewed the responses of the RE teachers who participated in the study: The concepts on which I focus are the following: RE and religious freedom; agency and structure; and voice.

³ 'Former Model C schools' refers to schools that were formerly 'White' schools under the apartheid regime. 'Former HoD schools' refers to the House of Delegates schools which were formerly 'Indian' schools. The 'peri-urban black school' refers to a school that is 'Black' in staff and learner composition and situated on the rural urban fringe.

RE and Religious Freedom

The right to religious freedom is embedded in Section 7 of the South African Schools Act, Act 84 of 1996 and is consistent with section 15(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (CRSA) (1996) which places a responsibility on the state to create conditions for the exercise of religious freedom without favouring a particular religion. School policy issued by School Governing Bodies must also be consistent with Section 9 of the CRSA (1996). According to a former Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, RE will enable children to engage with the multiplicity of religions which form part of the rich heritage of South Africa. Although the Religion and Education Policy (2003) encourages adopting a multi religious approach to RE, research by Roux (2007: 6) has shown that,

there are personal, religious and spiritual dimensions that considerably complicate the process of transformation [from a mono religious focus to a multi religious approach to RE] and the inclusion of different religions in the curriculum and praxis⁴.

The CRSA (1996) gives every individual the right to freedom of religion and states that individuals must also respect the right of others to freedom of religion. The right to freedom of religion can be classified as the freedom to adhere to a religion (freedom *to*) or the resistance to influences to either adopt or change a religion (freedom *from*) (Hammer 2001)⁵. According to Horn (2006) the attempt by the State, in response to the alienation experienced by adherents of religions other than Christianity during the years of colonial and apartheid rule, to give status to traditional African beliefs and other non-Christian religions has become a point of contention for those teachers in South African education who would prefer to endorse Christianity as the hegemonic religion, teaching RE using a

⁴ This constitutes practical action. It is about taking action and reflecting upon the action in order to inform new action (Roux & du Preez 2006).

⁵ It should be noted that freedom of religion excludes people who are free from religion e.g. an atheist. None of the RE teachers who participated in the study (Jarvis 2008) fell into this category.

confessional approach⁶. This complicates the process of transformation and the inclusion of different religions in the curriculum and classroom praxis.

In this article I position myself with Jackson (1997) contending that the function of the school is to assist learners to understand the nature of religion and to know something of the diversity of belief systems (and non-religious worldviews) and their significance to those who hold to them. RE provides the opportunity to teach learners to respect the right of others to hold a different religion or worldview. I concur with Roux (2007: 11) who suggests employing a ‘reflective-dialogical approach with phenomenological notions’ as the approach which would facilitate this process. A phenomenological approach allows the teacher to put her/his own beliefs into parenthesis without having to become unfaithful to them. Intrareligious⁷ and interreligious⁸ dialogue allows for critical inquiry and interaction. An element of reflectivity is required as individuals investigate their own religions while also developing a religious literacy about religions other than their own.

Agency and Structure

Here I refer to agency and structure⁹ in the context of drawing attention to the construction of and resistance to religious freedom in the school context. Research carried out by Roux (2005) suggests that the school’s attitude towards a multi religious approach to RE seems to directly influence the teaching perceptions and strategies of RE teachers. Schools can be sites of possible religious discrimination and the resulting conflicts and tensions that

⁶ Transmission of religious culture from one generation to the next within a certain religious tradition.

⁷ Allows for critical inquiry and interaction between groups/denominations of the same religion.

⁸ Helps to broaden knowledge about different religions when individuals of different religious traditions are in contact with one another within the same context,

⁹ Agency can be defined as the RE teacher’s free will/self-determination/autonomy and structure can be defined as the institutional or school constraint.

are created by the repetition of power or the resistance to it. An institutionalised or hegemonic religion could entrench a particular religious discourse. However any power that the school context exercises, has to be reinforced by individuals in order for that power to be reconsolidated (Baez 2000). A school (structure) could portray a particular norm (either negative or positive) with regard to an approach to religious freedom but it is enforced by individual RE teachers (agency). These individual RE teachers are agents of their existence and as such could possibly resist an intrinsic negativity towards other religions, or promote the same. It is individual agency that emerges from the margins of power that makes possible the disruption of and redefinition of (religiously) intolerant structures (Baez 2000; Giddens 2002). The notion of agency is not unproblematic however, as it fails to sufficiently take into account the difficulties associated with the individual's ability to make choices in the face of oppressive institutional structures. Recent research (Jarvis 2008; Roux 2007; Roux Du Preez & Ferguson 2007) has also shown that many RE teachers who come from mono religious backgrounds display signs of fear or discomfort when placed in a multi religious environment and are impotent in exercising individual agency. They still rely on a confessional presentation and view of religion.

In order for true transformation to take place in the RE classroom it is vital for RE teachers to be able to exercise agency by moving from a mono to a multi religious approach to teaching RE and by challenging entrenched institutional structures. RE teachers have the 'agentic' power to create new forms of behaviour and new ways of self understanding and new codes of meaning with regard to religion. By so doing they could play a pivotal role in the classroom in promoting respect for those who believe differently. Their voice is important as it can be considered to be an expression of agency (Deetz 1998).

Voice

In the apartheid era voices suggesting any form of multi religion education were silenced since they challenged the Christian-National ideology (Christie 1989). After 1996 previously silent voices have been articulated. According to Deetz (1998: 159) these voices have attempted to 'reclaim that which was marginalised' demonstrating that voice 'is the presence of active resistance

to constant processes'. An opportunity emerged for voices representing the diversity of religion in South Africa to be heard. Voice can be empowering and can have a very practical, emancipatory dimension. It can either express individual agency or can be constrained or silenced by structure (such as the school context).

Voice in this study (Jarvis 2008) described the way in which teachers articulated their understanding of religious freedom. The voices that emerged showed that in the discourse of religion there are dominant voices speaking in favour of the formerly hegemonic religion, thereby marginalizing the voices of those representing minority religious groups. In some cases even within the same religion, voices representing the dominant denomination held sway. Voices resistant to religious hegemony struggled to be heard or chose to remain silent, thereby supporting the status quo. According to Francis, Muthukrishna and Ramsuran (2006: 141) 'silences can be a potentially disempowering act. [They] can be manipulated and contrived in social contexts by other players and stakeholders'.

There needs to be clarity regarding hearing and listening to RE teachers' voices. Allen (2004) refers to 'dialogical voice' which is about searching for meaning and understanding, positing that teachers need an 'audience' which would respectfully 'listen' to what they are saying. This takes place when RE teachers are able to publicly express their opinions and consider the ideas of others. Dialogue provides the opportunity to get to know better, not only others who believe differently, but also oneself. Ipgrave's (2001) threefold approach to dialogue is useful. She suggests that primary dialogue includes the acceptance of diversity, difference and change. Secondary dialogue involves being open to difference, willing to engage with difference and ready to learn from others. The tertiary aspect includes the actual verbal interchange. This type of participation can have transformational powers (Allen 2004). Human voices that exercise the choice to act or not to act do indeed make a difference to the contexts in which they exist. Adopting a dialogical approach would afford RE teachers the opportunity to understand their own biography with regard to religion; an ability to identify practices which influence their beliefs; and the chance to achieve an individual voice, despite the strengths and endurance of other dominant discourses (Nothling 2001).

MacIntyre and Dunne (2002) suggest the use of ‘narrative unity’ for getting to know what educational transformation means. ‘Narrative unity’ takes place when RE teachers listen to one another’s stories. They could use their voice to shape a discourse about the issues surrounding RE as praxis in a multi religious school context. Narrative also encompasses the notion of ‘tradition and practice’ (MacIntyre & Dunne 2002). For any transformation to take place, RE teachers need to understand their own religious tradition, and equally, the religious tradition of others should also be empathetically investigated in an attempt to overcome prejudice. The CRSA Bill of Rights (1996) encourages the paradigm shift from a hegemonic religious tradition to one of getting to know what other religious communities advocate. ‘Narrative’ and ‘tradition’ could facilitate this process, and also inform ‘practice’ (MacIntyre & Dunne 2002). Informed ‘practice’ would entail a shift from a mono religious to a multi religious approach to RE.

In the next section I will be discussing RE teacher’s responses in order to contextualize and validate the arguments offered in this article. Their responses are categorised according to the following claims made in this article about the voice of the RE teacher:

- The RE teacher’s voice, influenced by his/her understanding of religious freedom, can either promote or discourage an inclusive, multi religious approach to RE.
- The RE teacher’s voice can be empowering and have a practical dimension.
- RE teachers need to publicly express their opinions and consider the ideas of others.

RE Teacher’s Responses

- *The RE teacher’s voice, influenced by his/her understanding of religious freedom, can either promote or discourage an inclusive, multi religious approach to RE.*

The findings in this research project showed that having a cognitive understanding of religious freedom is insufficient. The majority of the RE

teachers were able to define the human right to religious freedom as the right to practice the religion of one's choice without discrimination or intimidation and to afford others the opportunity to do the same. However, in schools A and B, teachers belonging to religious groups other than the brand of Christianity endorsed by the School Management Team (SMT) were subjected to continuous constitutional infringement as their religions were excluded from the school ethos and they were daily subjected to the practices of the hegemonic religion. They felt that their constitutional right to religious freedom was being infringed upon.

Other RE teachers considered the multi religious approach to RE as advocated by the Religion and Education Policy (2003) to be an infringement of their constitutional right to freedom *from* having to consider religions other than their own (cf. Hammer 2001). They voiced their understanding of religious freedom as the right to consider and practice their religion only.

Jane¹⁰: The freedom to practice the religion of one's choice. It is the freedom to express your religious beliefs that you were born and brought up with.

Sipho: It means you are free to talk about God and to preach his Word.

Bona: I think that Christianity is the right way and only that should be practised. Once you involve in practising other religion, automatically it affects your own religious beliefs.

It became evident that for these specific RE teachers, their biography in most cases played a role. These teachers had grown up in a mono religious environment, influenced by their parent's religion which became the religion that they embraced, informing their religious identity. When asked whether they thought their biography and religious identity affected the way in which they voiced their understanding of religious freedom, they all agreed that this was the case. Their religious biography formed the core of their social identity (Giddens 2002). They identified themselves in terms of religious categories, and compared and contrasted themselves with other religious groupings providing them with a sense of confidence and 'belonging'

¹⁰ The names used in this article are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the teachers who participated in the study.

(Jenkins 1996). Categorising themselves as members of a particular religion led to these RE teachers considering members of other religions to be having, or lacking, certain virtues, and this 'extrinsic discrimination' (Helms 1990) was considered to be morally sufficient for justifying differential treatment. Having to facilitate multi religious RE lessons as directed by the Religion and Education Policy (2003) and to explore religions other than their own, made them feel that their religious freedom to belong to and promote an exclusive religious group, had been stifled. These RE teachers were not able to engage, even at a primary level (Ipgrave 2001), in dialogue with a religion other than their own. They used their voice to entrench a confessional approach, discouraging an inclusive approach to RE.

By contrast RE teachers who were brought up in homes where religious diversity in society was accepted experienced no discomfort in adopting a multi religious approach to RE. This is evidenced by the responses from the following RE teachers, two of whom are Hindus and one a Christian.

Len: My parent's religion had a great influence on me. Because my parents were Hindi speaking I grew up in a home being rooted in Hinduism, this allowed me to find myself and where I come from...it has shaped me to have the ability to know where I come from and be open to understand and respect other religions.

Barbara: I do believe that my religion teaches me not to condemn other religions. I believe every individual has a choice to make on their own. I respect this.

Priya: My religious affiliation does not condemn other religions.

These RE teachers demonstrated a willingness to engage in religious dialogue at a primary, secondary and tertiary level (Ipgrave 2001). The school context in which they were teaching was also conducive to a multi religious approach to RE and supportive of these RE teachers. There is great potential for transformation in the domain of RE when both the individual teacher and the school context and policy support an inclusive, multi religious approach to teaching RE.

- *The RE teacher's voice can be empowering and have a practical dimension.*

It became evident that the SMT in all three schools played a significant role in the way in which RE teachers were able to (or not able to) exercise agency in terms of their approach to teaching RE. On an institutional level, in two of the schools, religions other than those supported by the SMT were marginalised, thereby establishing an 'institutional [religious] identity' (Jenkins 1996). In school A a Christian ethos was embedded in the school mission statement and prospectus/code of conduct. In school B, the hegemonic religion, namely, Catholicism, was clearly favoured. In both these contexts, the 'institutional identity' appeared to be more prominent than personal identity, as evidenced by the response of an RE teacher in school B who felt that her voice was not being heard '... because everyone follows the Catholic ethos'. Her voice was silenced by the SMT disempowering her from engaging in any meaningful dialogue that could lead to transformation in the approach to teaching RE.

The following categories demonstrate the status of the RE teacher's voice (agency) in response to the school context (structure). The RE teacher's voice ... :

- entrenching the status quo;
- that is silenced;
- promoting a multi-religious approach to teaching RE; and
- expressing discomfort and the need for transformation.

○ **The RE teacher's voice entrenching the status quo**

Some of the RE teachers continued to support and maintain the religious hegemonic status quo in the school, adopting a mono religious approach to RE. This was unequivocally expressed by the following RE teachers in schools A and B:

School A Principal: We're a Christian school and we do not give space/time to other religions to practice their religion at school.

Sipho: ... our ethos is Christian and so are our assemblies. I love it because I am a Christian I think Christianity is the right way and only that should be practiced.

Zandi: I'm happy with the religion environment I am around because they are all Christian. Only Christian religion is practiced.

Emily: You are determined in what you believe and don't alter on those beliefs. I think I can explain to the learners who are not familiar with going to church because there are those who can't even pray. So right now we have got to promote that.

Teaching in a school with a confessional ethos (where the school decided on the set of beliefs to be presented as the one true religion) meant that Christian RE teachers adhering to the brand of Christianity promoted by the SMT did not have to compromise their own personal religion. This view is emphasised by Sipho (school B) who clearly interpreted having a voice as being free to say what he felt like in the morning assembly (within the boundaries of Catholic doctrine). He suggested that teachers' voice can have an impact if 'we all believe in Christianity as we all have a say in the promotion of God's work'.

The voice of RE teachers like Sipho, Zandi, Emily and that of the principal in school A, entrench an understanding that religious freedom is simply freedom to practice one's own religion without regard for those who believe differently. Their voices reinforced the status quo, and the power and efficacy of the school structure (cf. Baez 2000).

○ **The RE teacher's voice that is silenced**

In schools A and B where the school structure supported Christianity, and more specifically in school B, Catholicism, as the hegemonic religious discourse, it was evidenced in the responses of the following RE teachers that dissenting voices would not be heard.

Purity: I do believe the learners at this school have to compromise their beliefs. There is no religious freedom ... we don't ever really pay specific attention

to any other religions other than Christianity... We are not allowed to discuss things openly at meetings.

Jabu: Keeping quiet is safer.

RE teachers like Purity (school B) and Jabu (school A) expressed disempowerment, sharing the view that it would be 'safer' to keep quiet because the only voices that would be heard were those supporting the hegemonic religion enforced by the SMT. These silenced voices could be manipulated and contrived by the SMT to be seen as accenting to the status quo thereby further entrenching a mono religious approach to RE.

○ **The RE teacher's voice promoting a multi-religious approach to teaching RE**

The RE teachers in school C expressed the religious freedom which the school (structure) promoted:

School C Principal: There are different religions and they are all treated the same or given fair share i.e. the school considers all religious holidays in the calendar.

Len: ... in our school we have total religious freedom and respect all religions. We should respect all religions as equal ... make a Hindu a stronger Hindu, Christian a stronger Christian etc.

Priya: Learning about other religions helps to broaden my own views. We are free to express our views and children are enthusiastic about learning about different religions.

These RE teachers were prepared to engage in dialogue about religion at all three levels (Ipgrave 2001). Their approach to teaching RE in a context of religious diversity was transformational and empowering, with a practical dimension. This is expressed by Rakeel who said that the RE teachers' voice could be used to deepen the learners' faith and belief in their own religions and at the same time teach them to respect other religions. This respect is not just about the right of others to believe and to do things differently, but it

also means recognising that those who believe differently have something of value to offer (Ipgrave 2001).

○ **The RE teacher's voice expressing discomfort and the need for transformation**

In school A which adopted a particular Christian ethos there were Christian RE teachers who expressed something of the individual struggle they were experiencing in trying to reconcile their personal religion with their cognitive understanding of religious freedom, the expectations of the Religion and Education Policy (2003) and the religious diversity in the school. While not wanting not to compromise their personal religion they experienced discomfort at continuing to adopt a mono religious approach to RE, thereby marginalizing other religions. Something of this confusion and discomfort can be heard in the following responses:

Lyn: I personally would be very offended if I allowed a Hindu prayer to be said in my classroom yet I would go full out and say the Lord's Prayer in my classroom. So to an extent I feel I am not respecting them but at the same time I am respecting them. I do feel that I am compromising my beliefs but not totally my religion. If you were to say the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of the day that is me teaching them to be tolerant of me.

Nadia: ... at times I feel like I should be sharing Christ with everyone so there is a small degree of feeling like I am compromising.

Lindy: The policy set by management is strongly based on a very Christian ethos of which I do agree with but we are not a private school, we are a government school and should be accommodating at least to an extent and respect other religions.

There were Christian RE teachers in School A and B who recognised more clearly, the need for transformation in the religious discourse in the school. They struggled with adopting a multi religious approach however, as it would run counter to that adopted by the SMT which was perceived to be unbending and unaccommodating. While expressing the view that their voice

would not be heard by the SMT, they nevertheless expressed themselves as follows:

Angela: ...we are certainly not being fair to non Christian learners. The other religions are not fully considered. My belief is firm and I feel very secure therefore there is no problem to teach religious freedom in school. You can help learners to respect other religious beliefs and practices.

Sibu: ... there are people who are African Christians but their religious freedom is not taken into consideration.

Jabu: One religion¹¹ is promoted just because more learners are from that religion so others are neglected because they are few members from different religions.

Charlene: I can deepen the learners' faith and belief in their own religions, at the same time teaching them to respect other religions.

After the 'official' interviews at school A, the National Strike¹² meant that teachers did not have classes to teach and so there was time to continue informally engaging with these RE teachers about their discomfort, fear of compromising their own religion and perception of disempowerment. These RE teachers had been obliged to construct their particular understanding of the human right to religious freedom influenced as they are by their biographical and school context. They appreciated having the opportunity to have their voices heard and found the dialogue helpful. The emancipatory process of dialogue helped these RE teachers come to the realisation that they did not have to compromise their own Christian faith by adopting a multi religious approach to RE. They acknowledged that they did have a transformatory voice that needed to be heard in the school. Despite a recent SMT decision to exclude RE from the LO curriculum these RE teachers

¹¹ Teachers at school B often used the term 'religion' as synonymous with 'denomination'. Catholicism is the hegemonic religion and other Christian denominations and other religions are overlooked.

¹² This strike which took place in June 2007, was supported by teacher unions. Whilst teachers were expected to report for work, the schools were closed to learners.

decided that they would in fact exercise agency and include RE and teach it using a multi religious approach. Their intention was also to form dialogical working groups in which they would continue the dialogue in the domain of RE. This would include discussion about curriculum development and the use of appropriate teaching strategies.

Of all the RE teachers I interacted with, I felt this group, having begun to navigate their fears and prejudices, best understood the need for transformation and that their voice had the potential to usher in transformation in the approach to curriculum development and praxis in RE.

- *RE teachers need to publicly express their opinions and consider the ideas of others.*

RE teachers need to be empowered by affording them opportunities to engage in emancipatory discourse (Ipgrave 2001). Dialogical activity brings together understandings and questions from a diversity of religious traditions and perspectives. It recognises the individuality of religious thinking and that even those who share a common religious identity may have differences in religious outlook. Simply knowing about different religions does not influence teaching skills and attitudes towards learners from different religious and cultural backgrounds (Roux *et al.* 2006). Dialogical engagement at a primary, secondary and tertiary level (Ipgrave 2001) can lead to transformed praxis in the RE classroom.

A reflective-dialogical voice (Roux 2007) that provides for the expression of own opinions and consideration of the ideas of others begins when RE teachers meet each other simply as people and not as representatives of one religion or another. The dialogue should enable RE teachers to engage substantially with each other, sharing their narrative (which includes tradition and practice). This dialogue has the potential to be emancipatory for those involved. RE teachers emerging from it are likely to be less fearful of compromising their own religious positions and more able to engage with confidence in situations of religious diversity. Their classroom praxis could be transformed as they seek to be inclusive, promoting a multi religious approach to teaching RE.

As a lecturer at a tertiary institution, it is my intention to give the

pre-service LO teachers the opportunity to engage in emancipatory discourse about RE. This will include the dialogical space to reflect on how they construct their understanding of religious freedom and to explore the influence of their biography on this understanding. Becoming literate about religions other than, and including their own, and having the opportunity to discuss suspicions, fears and possible prejudices in the domain of religion will hopefully help to shape their voice in a way that will be transformative in the discourse of religion by the time they become in-service LO teachers.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued for the importance of the RE teacher's voice. It is apparent that this voice is defined by the individual RE teacher's biography and understanding of religious freedom, and influenced by the school context. The paradigm shift from a mono to a multi religious approach to RE, as evidenced by the voices in this study, has to a large extent not taken place. This raises important questions and challenges for teaching and learning in a context of religious diversity. The relationship between individual voice and school context has implications for classroom praxis. RE teachers' voice can be empowering bringing with it the practical dimension of transformation with implications for curriculum change. Their voice can play a pivotal emancipatory role in the classroom by promoting religious tolerance and respect for those who believe differently so as to dispel the belief in the superiority of one particular religion leading to prejudice and antagonism (Baez 2000).

Concerns voiced by RE teachers include an anxiety about compromising their personal faith; of opposing the hegemonic religious status quo promoted by the school structure; and certain RE teachers experience discomfort at the lack of inclusivity in the approach to teaching RE. Dialogical space is key in providing the framework for RE teachers to explore these concerns. Dialogue could be emancipatory enabling RE teachers to become empowered to view the content they teach more insightfully, to select and employ their teaching methods more creatively and to become agents of curriculum development and design. Individual RE teachers can become 'agents of change' as they choose to regulate behaviour by exerting conscious choices, thereby increasing autonomy and control. The

power that individual voices have, can either entrench religious discrimination or promote an inclusive, multi-religious approach to teaching RE.

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Janet Jarvis

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