School Management and Leadership Education for Multi-Religious Schools

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ABSTRACT

Contradictions and contestations with regard to the implementation of religion-in-education policy have become a worldwide phenomenon. An increasing number of costly and protracted court and legislative battles between schools and parents over religion in schools has been reported. In this article, I aim to highlight some of the school management issues surrounding the implementation of religion-in-education policy in some selected South African schools. Based on mediation theory, the study uses individual interviews to gather data from twelve purposively selected school principals to investigate how they implemented the religion-in-education policy in their respective schools. The findings show that despite the implementation challenges of the religion-in-education policy, the majority of the selected school principals displayed the qualities of a transformative mediator. I, therefore, recommend that school leadership programmes for school leaders offer mediation, and transformative mediation in particular, as a leadership and management course. That is, South African universities should consider training school principals on the use of transformative mediation as a strategy they can use to resolve conflicts and handle disputes in schools as it holds potential benefits for fields such as education.

KEYWORDS

conflict resolution, mediation, policy implementation, religion in education, religious diversity, schools as legal persons

Introduction

In post-apartheid South African schools, the implementation of democratic policies poses serious challenges for school principals, especially in terms of their leadership roles (Hallinger, 2010). Key amongst these is the challenge of interpreting and translating national and provincial policies into school policies. Section 15(1) of the Constitution provides that "[e]veryone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion". Section 15(2) of the Constitution points out that religious observances may be conducted at state or state-aided institutions, provided that (a) those observances follow rules made by the appropriate public authorities; (b) they are conducted in an equitable manner; and (c) the attendance at them is free and voluntary (RSA, 1996a). Section 16(2)(c) of the Constitution further extends respect and protection of the right to freedom of religion, reassuring everyone that they have "the right to freedom of expression", although indicating that such a right may be "limited" if it extends to advocacy of hatred based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion.

The religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution is reaffirmed in the South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) and is further refined in specific policies and regulations. Section 7 of the Act clearly stipulates, "religious observances may be conducted at a public school under rules issued by the governing body if such observances are conducted on an equitable basis and attendance at them by learners and members of staff is free and voluntary". The Act, however, also mandates the establishment of democratically elected school governing bodies, indicating the roles, functions and responsibilities they are to perform.

Paragraph 58 of the National Policy on Religion and Education (2003) specifies that, in accordance with the Constitution, Section 22(1) of the Schools Act and relevant rules made by the appropriate authorities, the governing bodies of public schools may make their facilities available for religious observances in the context of free and voluntary association provided that such facilities are made available on an equitable basis (DoE, 2003). It also stipulates that School Governing Bodies (SGBs) have to determine the nature and content of religious observances for educators and learners. For example, religious observances may form part of a school assembly, but if it becomes an official part of the day, it must be on an equitable basis.

It is worth noting that schools as organs of the post-apartheid state are in no way excluded from the above obligations. Thus, public schools as legal persons become institutions to fulfil the mandate of equipping learners with knowledge of religion, morality, values and diversity. In other words, schools automatically become "legal persons". However, given the different interests of relevant stakeholder groupings, interpretations and translations are bound to differ and, without proper leadership, conflicts generated by these differences end up in courts of law. The case of the religion-in-education policy for schools in South Africa is evidence of this reality. The question then remains: do schools through their governing bodies of which the school principal is the member interpret and understand their roles as legal persons and implementers of legislations and policies discussed above? The next section attempts to answer this question

by first explaining the methodology and methods that were used in investigating this phenomenon. I will then present and discuss the findings on how school principals in this study led the implementation of the religion-in-education policy and the strategies they used to manage conflict and lead the implementation process.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study followed a qualitative research approach that focussed on exploring the ways in which principals mediate religion education in their schools. I had conducted individual interviews to solicit information from the school principals regarding their experiences in implementing the religion-in-education policy in their schools (Saldaña, 2015). Due to the limited work done on the phenomenon described above, the study employed a phenomenological research design because of its seldom use in studying the experiences that shape principals' thoughts, actions and choices of strategies when implementing democratic policies such as that of religion (Grey, 2014).

Sampling

For the study, I purposefully selected twelve school principals as the sample in order to avoid generalised findings. While this sample size may seem small, it is important to note that in a qualitative research approach, the focus is generally not on sample size but rather on sample adequacy. Hence, the adequacy of my sample was justified by my reaching the sampling saturation (Fargher & Dooley, 2012). The qualitative researchers regard that as an indication of quality (Guest, 2006). That is, one occurrence of a piece of data, or a code, is all that is necessary to ensure that it becomes part of the analysis framework. Frequencies are rarely important in qualitative research, as one occurrence of the data is potentially as useful as many in understanding the process behind a topic (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003). Moreover, qualitative research is concerned with meaning and not making generalised hypothesis statements (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). The principals were postgraduate students at the University of Pretoria, whom participated in their private capacity, and not as spokespersons of specific schools (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). That is, they narrated their stories as they had experienced the implementation of religion-in-education policy, not as per the expectations of their departments of education. The principals were a) engaged in leadership and management training at postgraduate level; b) had served in the department of education for at least fifteen years; c) exposed to various religion-in-education policies prior to 1994, post 1994 and post 2003; and d) were from various religious orientations, language and cultural groupings.

Although their schools and school administration were not the focus of this study, it transpired during the same study that the principals worked in public and independent schools that were located in the north-western region of South Africa, namely, Gauteng, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and KwaZulu-Natal. Although the sample is from one region of the country and may appear as a limitation of the study, it provided a detailed perspective into the principals' distinct leadership backgrounds

and experiences. The study was gender, racial and religiously represented. Three religions were represented, namely, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, and the participants comprised of nine males and three females. However, it must be clear that the participants' gender, province, historical origin and the type of school (secondary or primary) was not central to the selection criterion.

Ethical Considerations

I obtained approval to involve the principals/postgraduate students in the study from the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. In my position as the Research Assistant in the Department of Education Management and Policy Studies, I had access to the database of postgraduate students, and was able to send invitations to those who were school principals and deputy principals. I considered deputy principals worthy to participate since they carry quite a similar mandate as that of principals. This was a two-week call that was followed by a one-week follow-up. I then directed invitations to ten school principals who indicated their willingness and availability to participate. Realising that e-mail could not produce quite a reasonable number, I had to contact those that I knew, and two more agreed to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Over a period of four to five months in 2012, I used narrative interviews to collect data, with the principals' stories being recorded, transcribed, analysed and interpreted. Religious issues are usually debated and discussed at a sentimental level or are elevated to litigation through the courts, as stated in the introduction. Thus, the subject is rarely explored scientifically. In contrast to this, I made use of narrative inquiry to examine and understand the principals' experiences of religion that were not clouded by emotion or sentiment. Understanding previous religious experiences of school principals in this study allowed me an "insider view" that enabled the illumination of real people in real settings through the "painting" of their stories (Haydon, Browne & Van der Riet, 2018; Wang & Geale, 2015). I was able to further probe the principals' acceptance and/or rejection of the religion-in-education policy (Farrell, 2012).

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness of the Results

I transcribed the tape-recorded interviews and analysed the transcriptions in terms of the categories initially identified, namely, the principals' understandings of their mediating role in the implementation of the religion-in-education policy (Babbie, 2014). From this, themes such as policy development, learner admissions and educator appointment, teaching about religion, and religious observances emerged.

The raw data (tape-recorded interviews), interview transcripts, interview guides, list of participants and their profiles, as well as my field notes, were audited throughout the study period to validate their accuracy and authenticity-using peer debriefing. In addition, I sent transcriptions to participants, asking them to correct errors of fact. This ensured that I represented them and their ideas accurately (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). Finally, the study went through the programme called 'Turnitin', as per the university's requirements, to ensure its originality.

Findings

The school principals employed diverse strategies to implement the religion-in-education policy in their schools. Some resisted or ignored the policy, some sub-contracted it while others relied on the services of a mediator. Resistance to policy change in this study refers to the act at which change agents may passively demonstrate their resistance to proposed education policy change by either delaying or ignoring it, claiming that schools lack the requisite information on policy reform. Sub-contracting as viewed in this study refers to a phenomenon where the school principal implements the intended educational change according to the wishes of a particular interest group or the Department of Education. In this study mediation implies that the principal negotiates with various interest groups to try and reconcile differences and to find a way in which implementation acknowledges the interests of various stakeholders. The narratives in this study revealed that in most cases school principals did not implement the religion policy as they should have, either because they did not know how to or because the training they received from both the Department of Education and the university did not equip them with the skills to do so.

Their narratives uncovered the lack of skills to be another reason for this challenge, as suggested by one of the participating principals who claimed, "The policies just come and there are no people to unpack them" (*Participant 2*). Indications from the narratives of other participants suggest that they were trained, that is, they were told what was required of them and how to go about doing what they were expected to but they chose to ignore it. The same principal (Participant 2) stressed that the facilitators of the courses they attended told them *"everyone has the right to freedom of religion, but practically, when we come to the school, we would want learners to practice Christianity"*. Another principal stated, "One of the completely strange things to me was the request by parents that we had to release 35 Muslim children to leave for mosque at 12:00 on Fridays" (*Participant 1*).

While allowing learners to leave school early to attend mosque on Fridays was a challenge for some principals, others did not find this troublesome since all they needed was a confirmation letter from the parent that the learner was "a committed Muslim" (*Participant 3*). This practice seems to not accommodate Islam, but also appears to protect the religion. However, a principal pointed out that "releasing learners early on Fridays to attend mosque became a problem in terms of teaching and learning because there was no cover up time in terms of the activities that took place during their absence" (*Participant 3*). In this way, this principal protects and promotes learners' right to education.

I mentioned earlier that tolerance is one of the values religion education aims to promote. This was, to some extent, found to be the case with most school principals in this study. For instance, they allocated a classroom for learners to observe their religions (*Participant 6*), allowed Muslim learners to go to mosque on Fridays, and admitted learners and appointed educators with religious orientations other than Christianity (*Participant 4*). They also worked harmoniously with SGB members from

other religions, thereby demonstrating their tolerance of diversity. This is evident in the following statement by *Participant 5*,

> My previous chairman of the governing body was a Hindu and his wife was a Muslim. He was very happy with the way we dealt with religious matters at school. At the ceremony we would be signing Christian hymns, chorus, Bible reading and prayer. He did not have a problem with that. All he would ask was recognition that was there. He did not insist on anything. The fact that we were sensitive towards different religions, I think that was for him the most important aspect.

However, even though school assemblies observed Christian devotions, learners still had to attend them. One of the school principals admitted, "[w]e would emphasise the point of assembly attendance" (*Participant 8*). Another principal emphasised that "[u]nless there are cases where a parent would tell us that his child must be excused from the assembly, all learners had to attend" (*Participant 10*). Contrary to this open policy, this study discovered that some principals did not make allowances for learners to observe religions other than Christianity. For instance, Muslim learners were not allowed to observe their religions by means of the dress code. One principal said that "if learners would come wearing Muslim hats, we would call and tell them to stop wearing such hats with the aim of discouraging them from influencing others" (*Participant 7*). This quote clearly shows that the principal did not uphold the Constitutional laws that promote the freedom of religion and conducting religious observances in an equitable manner.

It became evident, however, that conflict occurred between the SGBs and the principals who supported the religion-in-education policy's position on making allowances for religious observances in schools. One of them, for instance, advised the SGB that they had to indicate in (the) policy that religious observances should be free and attendance should be voluntary. Yet, the SGB's responded, "No, no, no, wait, what are you actually saying? In terms of our school code of conduct, all learners must attend the assembly regardless of what they and their parents believe in" (*Participant 9*). This quote pointed to some of the difficulties that principals faced when they attempted to negotiate the process of acknowledging the interests of various stakeholders that did not align with the policy's position on religious observances in schools.

When conflicts occurred, the school principals demonstrated their willingness and ability to resolve them in diverse ways ensuring that they do not compromise the smooth running of the school. One of the principals, for example, mentioned, "I have never seen the SGB calling parents for religion policy discussion. The SGB does not mention anything in relation to religion to parents" (*Participant 10*). "The application form does not require religious status of the child" (*Participant 11*). Other schools excused educators from attending and/or conducting morning assembly. One of the principals pointed out that "educators are told when they are appointed at the school that they are welcome to arrive at school five minutes later if they are uncomfortable with the way morning assemblies are dealt with" (*Participant 7*). Similarly, another principal indicated, "[i]f an educator is not comfortable with the conducting of the

assembly, he/she must report. Although his/her name will remain on the duty roster, one SMT member will stand in for him/her" (*Participant 12*). This demonstrates the school principal is able to resolve conflicts by negotiating with various interest groups to try and reconcile differences.

In another principal's school, if they see that the preferred mode of dealing with religious observances has hiccups or bring conflicts, "we bring the matter back in a forum. We re-assess, we amend and then we continue. That is why the policies are not constant but, evolving depending on what is happening to the school" (*Principal 6*). The other principal reiterated this approach, "[w]e once gave the Muslim committee member an opportunity to conduct religious observances at the assembly on the argument that there are also Muslim children in our school, but it was not appreciated by both learners and members of staff. You could just see from their response that they do not enjoy it as they do with Christianity. We then had to discontinue" (*Principal 10*). In so doing, these principals negotiate with various interest groups to try and reconcile differences and to find a way in which implementation acknowledges the interests of various stakeholders. That demonstrates their ability to resolve conflicts.

Based on the preceding discussions, I infer that most of the principals understood and interpreted (a) the aim behind the religion-in-education policy; (b) their mediation role in the implementation process and, more importantly, (c) that as managers and leaders in multi-faith schools, they are obligated to fulfil the rights and freedoms as stipulated in legislation and educational policies. However, more often than not, their previous experiences, and not their theoretical knowledge of policy acquired through training, informed their decisions and practices.

Discussion

It is important to reiterate that the South African Schools Act does not deal with religion in education, religion education or religious instruction in proper detail. For instance, the Act does not specify how schools should respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights contemplated in sections 15(1) and 31(1) of the Constitution. Nor does it define "religious observances", thus leaving the door open to schools (legal persons) and their SGBs (their brains) to give meaningful content to the standards entrenched in national legislation, the Constitution and international human rights instruments.

In discussing the findings of the study, I will map the different ways in which principals conceptualised and approached the implementation of the religion-in-education policies of their schools by paying particular attention to two strategies, namely, sub-contracting and mediation. Sub-contracting, in the context of this study, refers to a strategy in which the school principal implements the intended policy changes according to the wishes of either the Department of Education or any of the stakeholder groupings (that is, parents, educators, and/or learners). The principal as a sub-contractor, therefore, merely forms one more link in a chain that connects policy developers with the educators who have to implement it and the learners who have to "consume" it (Day, 2005).

Mediation, and transformative mediation in particular, refers to a process in which conflict itself is transformed from a negative and destructive interaction to a positive and constructive one (Bush & Folger, 2005). From an education management perspective, this implies that the principal being "an insider" negotiates with various interest groups by trying to reconcile differences and finding ways in which implementation of school reform acknowledges the interests of various stakeholders (Fullan, 2007).

The findings presented above indicate that although most of the principals in this study claim not to have received adequate training from the Department of Education or institutions of higher learning, they performed their roles in such a way that conflict is either eliminated or minimised. In other words, they were able to interpret or understand that as school managers and leaders they have obligations to respect, protect, and promote the freedoms and rights of their followers to a certain extent. Their interpretation and understanding manifested in areas such as policy development, learner admissions, educator appointments, teaching religion, as well as religious observances that will be discussed below.

Policy Development

One of the functions of the SGB, as stated in Section 20 of the Schools Act, is to develop and adopt school policies, including those pertaining to religion (RSA, 1996b). In describing the ways in which policies are developed and implemented in their schools, it is clear that while some principals *sub-contracted* into the national policy, others mediated the policy during their schools' policy development processes. As sub-contractors, these principals became the *appropriate authorities* that drafted the religion-in-education policy of the schools. They drafted the policy either with the chairperson of the SGB or with the School Management Teams – SMT (Naidoo, 2005). Here, they used the "majority" principle to decide on religions that must form part of the religious observances policy of the school. In other words, priority goes to religious orientations of parents or learners in majority. For instance, since the majority of the parents and learners are Muslim, the school ultimately decided to subscribe to an Islamic ethos. In most of the cases, the principals justified their approach by stating that most parents who are SGB members are not educated, and that those who are educated do not have the time or necessary skills to carry out their functions (Xaba, 2011).

Despite facing the challenge of SGB members' lack of the necessary skills to execute the mandate of the Department of Education, some school principals were successful as transformative mediators of the policy (Mncube, 2009). Some of them would do everything to ensure that the conduct of the SGB and provincial education department is lawful, fair and reasonable (Joubert & Prinsloo, 2009). In fact, one of the principals took the initiative to find the right representation (that is, members from diverse religious backgrounds) in the candidates coming through for SGB portfolios regardless of religion while others would adopt some of the clauses from the country's Constitution, the Schools Act and the religion-in-education policy into their school policies. In doing so, such principals demonstrate their readiness and ability to face the complex, ambiguous and uncertain situation they found themselves in, not for their own sakes but for the sake of their schools (Simić, 1998).

Learner Admission and Educator Appointment

The school principals were aware of the religious changes that came about with the country's 1996 Constitution. Some of the changes they mentioned were that schools may not refuse learners' admission and/or educators' appointment on religious grounds (RSA, 1996a, 1996b). Based on these changes, schools with a religious ethos appointed educators and admitted learners despite their faiths. The narratives indicate that those schools that have a Christian character allowed appointees and learners from other religions to excuse themselves from morning assemblies (Van der Walt, 2011). Muslim learners were also permitted to leave school early to attend mosque on Fridays.

It is imperative to note that the principals in this study did not cite religion as the deciding factor on who could play a role in the SGB. It is for this reason that this study revealed that the majority of the governing bodies of schools were religiously represented with diverse religious representatives in leadership portfolios of the SGB (i.e., chairperson) (Naidoo, 2005). Based on these insights, I can argue that the schools led by the majority of principals in this study demonstrated a commendable level of religious accommodation. They played the role of transformative mediators, and as agents of change, they appointed SGB members from diverse religious backgrounds to reflect and reinforce the accommodating nature of their schools (Bush & Folger, 1994).

Teaching about Religion

The principals' narratives indicate that educators in their schools did not give religion education the attention it required. One reason for this was their lack of knowledge of religions other than Christianity. Ferguson and Roux (2003) reminds us that the majority of public schools officially-based religion education programmes on Bible Education (mono-religious Christianity) until 1997. This leaves no doubt that the majority of educators and parents who are members in the governing bodies in public schools are products of schools that exposed them to either one religion only or to no religion at all, with some schools having eliminated religion education from the school's curriculum (Ferguson & Roux, 2003).

It seems that with exposure to either one religion or none at all, educators' would find it very difficult to change their perceptions of and attitudes towards people of other religions. This is true for any person, not only educators, who comes from a predominantly mono-religious and/or mono-cultural background (Roux, 2005). It is, however, pertinent to note that there are principals in this study who admitted that in every religion there is something good, meaning that they can also promote values such as respect (Sulaiman, 2016; Fatima, 2014). Even so, challenges remain. For instance, Christian educators may struggle to teach about religions other than Christianity considering the fact that some of them received their training under the apartheid education system. Thus, although these principals had a positive outlook on differences, they would not be able to help transform the teaching and learning of religion education in their schools because they also lacked knowledge about religions other than their own (Roux, 2005).

Some participants also admitted that each religion is worth learning about. Where their educators lacked skills and knowledge, some principals would either secure supporting material and resources and/or staff development opportunities. As if it was not enough, one of these principals used the sub-contracted clauses to challenge the *status quo* (Franey, 2002). He protected a learner whom the SGB wanted to remove from school because she fell pregnant. Personal values such as respect for others, fairness and equality, caring for the well-being and the holistic development of learners and of staff, integrity and honesty are evident in this principal's vision and practices (Harris, 2010; Bush & Folger, 2005). His transformative leadership values and vision are primarily moral (that is, dedicated to the welfare of staff and learners, with the latter at the centre) and underpin not only his relationships with staff, learners, parents and governors, but also his day-to-day actions (Day, 2005).

However, another group of principals ignored the behaviour of educators towards the teaching of religion education. They admitted that they were having difficulties in imagining the teaching of religions that were different from their own. This correlates with the research by Ferguson and Roux (2003) that discusses exposure to either one religion or none would influence one to find it very difficult to change his/her perception of and attitude towards other religions. Research suggests that such attitudes might lead to a denunciation of some of the religious beliefs and practices and by so doing destroy even the good that prevails in South Africa and the world (Frankema, 2012). The views and reactions of these school principals indicate the need for a careful and proper approach to the implementation of religion-in-education policy in schools. Otherwise, it would be difficult for principals to lead the way to accommodating diverse religions in schools as required by legislation.

Religious Observances

The country's religion-in-education policy defines religious observances as activities and behaviours that recognise and express the views, beliefs and commitments of a particular religion, and may include gatherings of adherents, prayer times, dress and diets (DoE, 2003). The constitutional and the policy provide that religious observances may be conducted at state or state-aided institutions, provided that (a) those observances follow rules made by the appropriate public authorities; (b) they are conducted in an equitable manner; and (c) the attendance at them is free and voluntary (RSA, 1996a, 1996b, 2003).

However, the narratives in this study revealed that the performance of morning devotions (religious observances such as prayer) in some of the schools continued in the Christian way while other minority religions like Islam were marginalised (Van der Walt, 2011). In the former, the schools did not allow learners and educators who subscribed to minority religions to observe their religions, either in terms of dress code or in terms of worship (Alston, Van Staden & Pretorius, 2003). In the latter, schools provided classrooms for learners and staff who subscribed to minority religions to use, and they occasionally permitted Muslims to leave school early to attend mosque on Fridays. They also excused educators from attending or conducting morning assemblies where Christian religious orientations, for

instance, were observed. It is important to point out that in fulfilling the role of transformative mediators, the principals acknowledged the diversity that exists among learners in terms of religious and cultural backgrounds (Tam, 2010). As such, these principals chart a direction that convinces stakeholder groupings that it is time to change (Moloi, 2005).

Conclusion

Despite the practical challenges that school principals encountered in the implementation of religion-in-education policy, they demonstrated confidence, openness and generosity in developing the identity of their schools as legal persons. In striving to maintain this status, they displayed the reasonable amount of integrity, ability or potential to use their past religious experiences to transform the quality and nature of interaction in their schools. Some of the principals portrayed themselves as transformative mediators by becoming spiritual beings having a human experience rather than human beings who may be having a spiritual experience. The danger of this stance, however, lies in the possibility that the interests of the principal might supersede those of the school. If different stakeholders pursue markedly different interests, the main purpose and function of SGBs will be defeated. I recommend proper and adequate training for school principals in order to assist the South African government's attempt to facilitate the implementation of policies fraught with tensions. These policies are meant to bring harmony and promote good working relationships rather than conflict and division. A mutual understanding of policies is therefore of paramount importance. I further recommend that universities offer a course on mediation, transformative mediation in particular, as a leadership strategy for handling disputes and solving problems in schools as it holds potential benefits for fields such as education.

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