‘I believe in one God’ or the issue of teaching religion in Namibia

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In the modern pluralistic world, the question of whether religious education should be provided at schools, and what kind of moral tuition it should be, keeps returning. The dilemma can be partly linked to the ambiguity of purposes that such education may serve. Depending on the way religious knowledge systems are communicated, they can be used to endorse a specific homogenous national identity or they can assist in building global citizenship. To prevent religion from becoming a divisive factor, an inter-faith approach to moral education needs to be adopted. Based on inclusivity and impartiality, rather than promotion of a specific religious stance, it should help students embrace diversity, while ascribing pride to their multiple cultures and beliefs. The issue seems particularly important in multicultural and multi-religious contexts, where integration of diverse people, as opposed to their assimilation or exclusion, is needed for social cohesion and nation-building. This policy brief deals with religious and moral education in one such country – Namibia, chosen for its perceived lack of intercultural conflicts despite the cultural diversity of its society. The brief identifies the gaps between policy and practice with relation to inter-faith education and recommends possible actions to address the problems.

The fear of God guides decision-making in Namibia

Namibia is a secular democratic state with a highly heterogeneous population in terms of ethnic origin. There are no official statistics for the country with relation to religious affiliation of its inhabitants, and the census does not include this category either. However, according to estimates, the majority of Namibians (80 per cent – 90 per cent) consider themselves Christians (of different denominations), while 10 per cent – 20 per cent of the population still follow African traditional beliefs. Smaller communities of agnostics, Baha’i, Muslims, Buddhists, and Jews have also been reported for the country.

The freedom of cultural expression, which includes the practice of religion, is guaranteed to all the citizens by the constitution of the country (Article 19). Additionally, the Education Act (2001)
provides for freedom to practise and manifest any religion at state schools (Article 40.1). According to the legislation, educational institutions can determine their own conduct in respect of religious observance, but only in consultation with the parents of the learners (Article 40.2). Accordingly, neither pupils nor school staff should be forced to attend any specific religious practices (Article 40.3).

In 2004, Namibia adopted Vision 2030, a strategy describing the path that the country was to undertake to become ‘a just, moral, tolerant and safe society with legislative, economic and social structures in place to eliminate marginalisation and ensure peace and equity between women and men, the diverse ethnic groups and people of different ages, interests and abilities’.

The objective set in the document was to be attained through, among others, education. Consequently, in 2010, a new National Curriculum for Basic Education, based on the existing legislation, was introduced in schools. It set the tone for a learner-centred system designed to create a knowledge-based society. The authors of the curriculum recognised the impact of globalisation on contemporary Namibian society and thus emphasised the importance of embracing one’s identity and values as an individual, a culture and a nation, while understanding the changing multi-cultural world around. Social Sciences were indicated as the main medium of moral and citizenship education. Included within this field was subjects such as Environmental Studies, Social Studies, Life Skills, and Religious and Moral Education (RME).

RME in Namibia has gone through a shift in paradigm in the last two decades. A change from apartheid-influenced Christian confessional-based education to religious and moral instruction focusing more on life orientation and citizenship education was instigated after the country gained independence. Simultaneously, African traditional religions and cultures, as well as African philosophy were identified as important elements of contextualised schooling and included in the RME programme. The new curriculum described the approach adopted for religious education as inter-faith, one that promotes ‘the spiritual and religious well-being of the learner with due regard to the diversity and freedom of beliefs’.

The programme was designed to revolve around common moral values and shared traditions within the religious diversity of the country and of the world. The syllabus of the subject further emphasised that the teacher’s approach must not be dogmatic in relation to their own beliefs, but ecumenical in terms of Christian beliefs and inter-faith-oriented in relation to other religions and value-systems.

Consequently, despite Christianity being the dominant religion in the country, teachers were instructed to adapt RME lessons to the views represented in the classroom.

However, when studying the programme of RME in detail, one cannot help but notice that African traditions and customs form part of the subject only in Grade 6 (minor references are also made in Grades 3 and 4), whereas during the rest of the schooling, different life-oriented topics are tackled mostly from the point of view of Christianity or, to a lesser extent, Judaism (examples are also infrequently drawn from Islam). Moreover, the syllabus is clearly influenced by Christian religion. Even with regard to the local context, it highlights the impact of African traditions on Christianity in Namibia, thus trying to link the two together. Such a Christian-focused, inter-faith-‘wrapped’ moral education can probably be explained by the Vision 2030 model, which also seems to favour a very specific view of reality. It sees the Namibian society as one that ‘respects and upholds the right of every person to enjoy, practice, profess, maintain and promote his/her culture, language, tradition or religion in accordance with the constitution’. Yet, it further states that ‘although Namibia remains a secular society, Christianity is the most popular religion, which holds promise of the moral upbringing of our children, and shapes the moral basis of our interpersonal dynamics, harmony and peaceful co-existence’.

The government’s position on religion is finally fully disclosed in the sentence: ‘Above all, the fear of God guides decision-making in Namibia and provides the driving force for the maintenance of a just and morally upright society’. As much as the God mentioned in the excerpt is not specified, the stance is based on the assumption that the whole society believes in one and the same monotheistic God and shares in the fear of this God. Thus, Vision 2030 seems one-sided; it not only excludes certain types of believers, such as ethno-religionists, but also completely omits the atheists and agnostics. All considered, one may actually ask whether a country whose decisions are underpinned by religious beliefs can be considered secular. Therefore, although Vision 2030 was developed in an inclusive context, one cannot help but question the logic of the document in itself – if Namibia remains a secular country (not connected with religious or spiritual matters) then how can its decision-making be
guiding the fear of God? The aim of this policy brief is not to disprove the country's secular status but rather to illustrate the taken-for-granted religious assumptions hidden within its policy, which may be more harmful to religious inclusivity than they are enabling.

The hidden curriculum

Within this study, qualitative localised research was undertaken by the author in three state primary schools in the Kunene Region of Namibia. It was designed to understand people’s lived experiences in relation to multiculturalism in the educational setting. Data for the study was gathered through individual interviews with teachers and school management, group discussions with pupils, and observations in classrooms. A questionnaire with open-ended questions was also distributed. Participant’s perspectives on how education caters for a multicultural society provided a glimpse into the extent to which Christianity pervaded schooling, which in fact is meant to be more germane to cultural diversity.

Narratives of the respondents as well as observations in class demonstrate that a ‘hidden Christian curriculum’ is regularly included in the programme of RME and other subjects. Teachers not only lack understanding of the different religious traditions they are supposed to discuss with the pupils but are generally not aware of the reason behind the inclusion of world religions in the school curriculum: ‘The problem with our [Namibian] education system is that we are Christians and we have to teach Jewish [religion]. I don't understand that. I wasn't even taught that.’

The problem seems to lie in the fact that educators have the wrong perception of RME. Strikingly, teachers treat the subject as a religion course, instead of seeing it as a space for discussion on ethical and philosophical dimensions of religious systems globally. The role of RME is not to replace home-based religious and moral teaching, which was highlighted in the syllabus. Intertwined with human rights and democracy education, sustainable development, as well as AIDS and HIV education, the subject was designed as part of citizenship education.

However, the study also showed that strong attachment to their own beliefs and a particular perception of other faiths by teachers individually play a preponderant role in moral education. The teacher may be openly reluctant to discuss with the learners the basics of religious traditions which they personally do not share. One of the interviewed educators, a Christian woman involved in missionary work, stated that she did not teach other religions and beliefs, as it could put ideas in the heads of the pupils. ‘It could be dangerous,’ she claimed. Other teachers usually denied ‘preaching’ a particular religious doctrine, stating instead that the God that children learned about remained undefined and could represent any religion. Apart from the fact that this universal deity was clearly a monotheistic God, references made to Him usually indicated the Christian God. For instance, children were taught songs praising Jesus and heard stories from the Bible. When learning about their weekly duties, they repeated all together that five weekdays are for attending school, while Sunday is the day to go to church. Interestingly, teachers used Bible stories and Christian references in non-religious contexts as well. During geography class, the Nile was described as a river in North Africa, where Moses was left afloat in a basket. The Red Sea, in turn, was associated with the Israelites who walked through it, thanks to God's intervention.

African traditional beliefs were usually discussed based on the student’s experiences. In this case, teachers often learned from their pupils and from each other about the customs and traditions of fellow Africans. Yet, even though these indigenous beliefs were widely acknowledged as part of the pupil’s identities, some teachers audibly used a patronising voice when speaking about what they perceived as superstitions that will eventually disappear with time. The religious backgrounds of the teachers, Christian or otherwise, clearly influenced their opinions.

Given that the prescribed material for religious education is just a compass that directs educators in discussing moral values and religious traditions, the responsibility to demonstrate to the pupils the diversity of the viewpoints and to look for unifying elements in the various faiths rests with the teachers as individuals. Consequently, depending on the intercultural competence of the instructors and their ability to conduct a dialogue with the pupils rather than act as the authority in matters of spirituality, RME may either ‘enable learners to understand their religious beliefs and practices, and their values, and to accept other people and groups whose values and religious traditions differ from their own’ or, to the contrary, enforce the religious perspective of the dominant agent or group; in this case of Christians. Meanwhile, only one of all the interviewed teachers participated in
training that addressed multicultural diversity. The same person also took part in an inclusive education course.

In two of the schools studied, Christianity was practised on a daily basis, either in the form of daily prayers in the classrooms or in the form of Bible teaching at a weekly assembly, both obligatory. Teachers’ meetings also began with a group prayer. Apparently, the faith that dominated among the school management – Christianity in both cases – influenced religious practices in the entire institution. One of the said schools even welcomed pastors to talk to children and invite them for services in their churches; traditional religious leaders or representatives of other religions were not involved in any way. This Christian-based approach was met with enthusiasm by the teachers who shared the beliefs. However, it was strongly criticised by more liberal teachers, who deemed it inappropriate for the multi-religious school community. One of the said schools even welcomed pastors to talk to children and invite them for services in their churches; traditional religious leaders or representatives of other religions were not involved in any way. This Christian-based approach was met with enthusiasm by the teachers who shared the beliefs. However, it was strongly criticised by more liberal teachers, who deemed it inappropriate for the multi-religious school community. One of the teachers even admitted that he himself did not feel comfortable during the everyday prayers he was expected to attend. He argued that Christian religion was imposed on children, as they had to learn the Bible even though they did not necessarily belong to the Church.

The attitudes towards religion observed in the third of the visited schools showed a completely different approach to faith and morality in the school environment. The inter-faith education adopted in the said institution was best defined by a teacher who instructed his students:

‘Some people believe they are talking to God through the holy-fire and the ancestors, some choose Mohamed, others – Jesus Christ. God is one, the ways people choose to communicate with him are different. You should not be forced to believe in anything. You need to choose for yourself.’

In the other said school, no prayers or Bible teachings were conducted. Similarly, no ‘easy’ answers to questions about faith were given. When a pupil asked whether after death people joined God or the ancestors, the tutor simply responded: ‘You are asking me?’

Conclusions and Recommendations

Even the most advanced policy means nothing if it is not being properly implemented. When it comes to education, it is mostly the teachers and school management, as individuals, that are responsible for putting the policies into practice. As can be seen from the above examples, teachers need intercultural competence to discuss matters of religious diversity in a well-informed and non-judgemental way. The ignorance of educators or their reluctance to teach something they do not believe in results in children being educated, or even indoctrinated, in a religion that is not their own.

To address the abovementioned issues, the following recommendations are made:

1. Teacher education programmes should be revised to prepare future teachers to work with diversity.
2. Seminars and workshops dealing with multiculturalism and religious plurality should be organised for school staff to help them develop intercultural competence.
3. RME teachers should be provided with training that explains the inter-linkages between religious education and citizenship education to help them understand the way the subject can contribute to the peaceful development of a pluralistic society.
4. Teachers should be trained in methods and techniques of teaching that involve the participation of students. The ethical teachings of spiritual traditions should constitute a basis for reflection and dialogue rather than sources of authority for the pupils to follow. The exchange of experiences between the teacher and the pupil through dialogue is important too, given the country’s focus on learner-centred education.

Notes and References

6 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 The schools studied are not identified to protect the identity of respondents. Each of the institutions is a cluster centre within a different educational circuit in the Kunene Region.
11 Ibid.
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