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Faith-based Schools: Is a critical engagement with social justice possible?

Abstract
Faith-based schools have been part of the education systems in many countries for centuries. The management and curricula of these schools were/are looked upon as foundations for good ethical behavior and the moral fiber of societies. The previous South African Christian National Education system, till 1994, serves as an example of political indoctrination through Religion in Education. This brings the promotion and sustainability of faith-based schools into question. Research since 1993-2008 on religion in previous public faith based schools and the processes for introducing a "new multireligious education" curriculum will be outlined. In this paper I will argue that faith-based schools have the propensity to create "artificial safe spaces" due to the particularistic notion of their belief and value system. The deficiency of interreligious interactions, teaching-learning activities, and the exclusive notion of a faith-based school, will impede a "religious conscience and literacy" that will exclude critical thinking and social justice discourses.

Introduction
When religion goes to school, what approach can create *safe spaces* and simultaneously create opportunities for critical engagement on social justice issues? When one argues in favor of faith-based schools, is remains one of the most important questions to be answered. Religion education in faith-based schools aims primarily to teach and inculcate children that the particular religion's values, customs, rituals and world views are sacred. One needs to disrupt this notion and ask what the responsibilities of public or private schools in the 21st century are, and can we act as responsible educators to contribute to an open society for religious respect?

I would like to position myself within this debate (Roux & Van der Walt, 2011; Roux, 2013) as the arguments might augment my viewpoint that faith-based schools have the propensity to hamper the notions and desires of critical thought. The notion of a democratic classroom is also in question, with a sole mono-religious stance in classroom praxis that will influence the whole-school environment. I have, however, the propensity to distract social justice issues to become merely part of a religious philosophy and will lack critical engagement with the global social issues. A mono-religious stance can create a religious community with a more conformist and traditional outlook on society. Such as position in society, and its comments and roles concerning social justice issues, will impact on people outside the specific religious community.

Faith-based schools have been part of many education systems in different countries for about a century, faiths and religious communities. Traditionally, countries, societies and individuals formed

their political, economic, cultural and religious identifications in many forms of expressions, which one is outlined in their religious practices and philosophies. In the curriculum development of faith-based schools, it is looked upon as the foundations for good ethical behavior. It becomes an extension of the moral fiber of the religious community or society in order to "secure" the religious customs for generations to come. The well-being of a society is often measured by the moral fiber of their religious communities, as well as the state of their education system. It is interesting to note that when societies find themselves in a moral crisis, it is expected that educators will be the interlocutors for better fundamental and core values to educate the new generation in the particular moral code of society. This notion influences all sectors of education.

In order to engage in critical thought on religion, teachers' training should be the vehicle for transformation and curriculum change in RiE (Roux, 2009). John Valk (in Sporre, 2010: 103-120) stated that the purpose of universities is changing and the fact that religion is making a comeback to society is noticeable. This will impact on the essence and curriculum development, as well as processes of teaching-learning applications for religion in schools and society. One should, however, acknowledge Geertz's (1973) definition of religion as a "cultural system" that gives meaning to people's lives, defines the world and give hope for the "unforeseen" of the future.

However, re-assessing research since 1993- 2004 and discourses in RiE in South Africa at present, I am arguing that faith-based schools are creating artificial safe spaces due to the particularistic notion of their belief and value systems. The deficiency of interreligious interactions, teaching-learning activities, and the exclusive notion of a faith-based school, will impede a religious conscience and literacy that will exclude critical thinking and discourses on social justices issues (Roux, 2010). I re-assess my own research because of the identification of repetitive notions on RiE after 20 years in this field of study. (See addendum for tables = to be discussed in presentation)

Religion and tradition: a particularistic notion

Traditions and enculturation into a tradition have many advantages, for example, by being part of a religious or cultural group that is being nurtured; one experiences a sense of belonging, especially in our globalized society constituted of Western individualism. Enculturation as an act of educating in a specific tradition can cause positive and negative outcomes. Given the history of religious education (faith-based and/or public schools' religious education) in pre-1994 South Africa with its Christian National Education policies that were used for political gain, I question the notion of enculturation in public and faith-based schools. Although fundamental and religious communities from diverse religious convictions have different aims for establishing faith-based schools, there is a possibility that faith-based schools can become the defenders for a divided society within a particular view on social justice. The importance of being educated in a religion has two notions; one to be educated in one's faith and tradition, and the other to act responsibly in a broader multi-religious and multi-cultural society and global environment. New interests and discourses on faith-based schools are part of the reasoning on so-called moral declines in societies, as some argue that moral decline is a result of a multi-religious approach to traditions, its values, and questioning practices.

The development of a multi-religious approach in public schools in Britain and Europe (Jackson, Miedema, Weisse, & Willaime: 2007) informed also religious education scholars in South Africa. The proclamation of the Reformed Act of 1988 in Britain, and the interaction of different theories on Religion in Education, introduced new initiatives to traditional faith-based schools and introduced aspects of multi-religious dialogue and multi-religious curricula with phenomenological, reflective and interpretative approaches, with its main aim to understand diversity. The deliberations on faith-based

school from 1997-2004 in Britain and the position of these schools in the education system were a long and intense debate (cf. Jackson, 2003; Levinson, 1999; Burtonwood, 2002; Hand, 2002). Arguments were raised from an education philosophical, curriculum and educational studies stance and motivated from a liberalist, communitarian or particularistic point of view. In analyzing these viewpoints and arguments, it seems that two notions on faith-based schools are prevalent. First, the integration of values and education and bringing children in contact with members of different belief and value systems, and defending the right to a cultural (religious) distinctiveness in a mono-religious or single faith school (cf. Burtonwood, 2002). Secondly, the right to explore and inculcate children with a specific religious, value or belief system's doctrines and parental rights for caring about their own religious beliefs support only in a particularist approach. The multi-religious approach in Britain began in many schools in 1988 with the support of the Reform Act.

In South Africa since 1994, taking the previous Christian National Education system (1960-1994) into consideration, the position of religious education in schools, change in the political dispensation, the missionary history, the public and academic discourse were socially driven, religiously laden and emotionally motivated. Academics in Religious Studies could, for the first time, become part of discourses on critical though and socially just issues. It was clear that academics were officially divided into two lines of thought:

- those who argue for maintaining the system as it was before (public schools in CHE); and
- Those who argue for an inclusive RiE policy, with the purpose to heal the scars of our recent history, where race and division (churches and schools by race) and divided religions, do not exclude children from other religions will experience the full curriculum. The aim might also to keep them safe from religious indoctrination

With the acceptance of the policy on *Religion and Education* in South Africa (2003), including representatives of the majority religious convictions, the process was started to set a new direction for the scattered South African religious education scene. The implementation of the Policy and the subsequent years didn't seem to yield the outcome one expected (Roux, 2009).

Although the Life-Orientation curriculum in the school system gives room to a multi-religious approach, the hidden and null curriculum are still infusing the religious ethos of the school within the framework of the majority of parents, school governing bodies and teachers' belief system (faith). The most alarming aspect is that public schools in South Africa (especially Ex-Model C flagship-schools) are still offering and instill a traditional mono-religious school ethos and religious education, which is inherently the same as existing faith-based schools. If one analyses these approaches to devotion, curriculum interpretations, and extra-curriculum activities, very little has changed. Children and parents who do not adhere to the schools' ethos are still in a wilderness of adaptation and conflict.

Van der Walt, Potgieter and Wolhuter (2010: 39-40), argued that a "confessional pluralism" and "interreligious dialogue" is only possible when religious instruction (see this notion as mono-religious instruction/education/indoctrination) is part of the public school system. They give examples of places where religious intolerance still prevails, and specify that religious convictions are openly dialogued upon in these schools as "public spaces" (e.g. Nigeria). This argument can be contested with examples where religious intolerance in schools (Kenya) brings religious and gender conflict and no dialogue takes place due to the patriarchal composition of the Abrahamic religion and social fiber of the country (Atoyebi, 2012).

Confessional dialogue, in South Africa, according to Van der Walt, Potgieter and Wolhuter (2010: 39-40), is confined to religious institutions and parental care, as subscribed by the Policy (2003). Their

argument inclined that interreligious dialogue cannot take place in any discussions on confessional matters and/or traditional interpretations of religious practices, deities and other practices. They further stated that: *"(I)interfaith and interreligious understanding and tolerance cannot be promoted in the context of the state (sic) school, because of the ban on confessional sectarian religious education (instruction)"* (2010: 39-42). This argument confirms that theorist in religion education in South Africa still believe that the previous education dispensation, with its discriminatory curricula and religious instruction, did justice to all in our diverse religious convictions. Opposing this stance I argue that: firstly, the position of RiE in South African public schools is at present not regarded as public spaces by its role players (Roux, 2009). If the ontology of public schools are taken as a given, any child in any public school has the right to practice her/his religious practices next to the religious practices of the so-called majority of school-goers (Policy, 2003; School Act //////). There is still and on-going confessional approach towards religious practices in many public schools and tertiary institutions.

Secondly, there is a lack of discourse on an ontology and epistemological of religion in public schools (excluding faith-based schools) and its position outside the current Policy Document (2003), (Prinsloo 2008, Roux, 2009; 2012). The continuous discourse, and actions and legal court cases against children from other religions (Van Vollenhoven & Blignaut, 2007) supported a gross intolerance stance in public schools. I argue that the particularistic notion of traditions in a faith-based school, also in our public schools, still remains the main denominator in RiE. From a pedagogical perspective, the current religious education approaches and inculcation of values in public and faith-based schools is contestable (Du Preez & Roux, 2010).

Artificial safe spaces – what does it mean?
In order to put the argument to the test, I retract a vision of Catholic Schools in South Africa that conducts a dual approach: first to embrace the faith with and secondly to develop an understanding of diversity. The vision statement reads:
 "*The Catholic School strives to make Christ visibly present in every dimension of its educational enterprise. Through Religious Education it does this by offering, in the Catholic tradition, a holistic programme as a light to illumine every learner's search for the meaning of life, and for the way to live it. In partnership with family and faith community, it leads learners to understand and value their own faith, and the faiths of others, while deepening their spiritual and moral appreciation of life*."
(Retrieved 15 July 2012: *http://www.cie.org.za/areas_of_focus/religious_education*/).

In an article *Religious upbringing reconsidered*, Michael Hand (2002) posed a question to colleagues on the liberal and conservative line of argumentation on the logic of a religious upbringing without indoctrination. The notion of religious upbringing is primarily to introduce children to the practices, beliefs and values of the religion. Therefore, religious practices and worship are the main step and action in religious upbringing. As Hand (2002:545) is arguing: "*To impart a religious belief one must use a form of leverage other than the force of evidence, and this it seems is necessary indoctrination".* Hand (2002:545) argues that central to this problem is not the "logic possibility but rather the practical difficulty of giving children a religious upbringing without indoctrinating them". The conflict remains between the rights of the parent/teachers/school environment to raise her/his child within her/his own worldview

In exploring the ontology of safe spaces in social justice research and the outcomes thereof in classroom praxis and social issues (Roux, 2012:31), the notion of safe spaces was based on elements of caring and the work of Nel Nodding (1984). Du Preez (in Roux, 2012:58) states that "the notion of safe spaces is often ambiguous and that this might have several implications for education". Du Preez (2012:59) further argues that safe spaces are contentious and one needs to look at the ontology of safe

spaces. She states that we are "creating empty spaces when we view the right to education as mere access to education institutions, when we merely see the work of curriculum as the selection of contents and methodology, and when we attempt to safeguard learners against the social realities in which they are situated" (2012:59). Du Preez (2012:59) further argues that we have a "fixation with safety", while it is "essentially about risk and danger"; we have an illusion of what a safe space in schools should be and view the classroom or a faith-based school (CDR) as a "presumably stable and safe space", which is "safeguarded against the unstable outside world". I concur with her that the safe spaces (in faith-based schools) are: "highly political". She describes that the instability of the world engulfs with atrocities and warfare, and that "individuals tend to isolate themselves in an attempt to safeguard themselves from potentially dangerous contexts". Many of these clashes are highly religious and culturally motivated and not being concerned about religious and social issues can create artificial safe spaces for learners. (cf. Boostrom, 1998:398). The global village is a high-risk environment and one needs to argue that isolation cannot help to engage in conceptualizing what risk environments mean and what they are (Jansen, 2009:274). I concur with Du Preez's (2012:59) notion that "we know a space is safe when risks can be taken in such a space".

In a search for new possibilities in religious teaching-learning we need to bring new dimensions to the classroom praxis and adapt new teaching-learning content and material. Exploring social justice issues and multi-religious content there should not be in conflict with social change and interactions with new social orders if these new social orders are responsible and democratic.

The complexity of this notion is how a teacher should use the new information, content and context, and how to facilitate an environment where explorative and constructive teaching-learning can take place and still be able to create a safe space for "risk taking" by the learner. This is a contentious issue when exploring a democratic and free society's responsibilities towards educating the next generation. If one takes the previous arguments of traditional faith-based schools (ethos/vision) into consideration, is seems that faith-based schools should provide spaces for members of a specific religious community where risks can be taken and potentially controversial issues be handled.

Waghid (in Tayob & Weisse, 2011:28) explores notions on critical Islamic pedagogy in his chapter on Madrasah schools. He argues that critical pedagogy cannot be only "narrowly connected to nurturing", which are one of the main aims of Islamic faith-based schools. Critical pedagogy needs to enhance critical thought on every aspect of the faith, religious content and values. Learners should not be satisfied to agree with everything she/he is taught, but should explore what makes sense and in the process have the ability to disagree and adopt questioning attitudes of the tradition (Waghid, 2011:28; Roux, 2012). One of the main risks in a mono-religious faith-based environment is that you are only concentrating on the tradition and its moral code. It is at this juncture that religious conscience and religious literacy will exclude critical thinking and discourses on social justice issues. My reasoning is that for three decades (1960-1994) one section of a nation's critical discourse on the social injustices was silenced and never part of the curriculum, and an artificial safe space of the CNE public and faith-based schools became politically laden and socially barren.

Research in inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue (Roux, 1993-2004; Roux. et al., 2009) indicated that the complexity of dialoguing on religious traditions is not only related to learners'/students' understandings of their own religion, but it is mostly due to the inadequate knowledge construct of the teacher on different interpretations of religious contexts (Ferguson & Roux, 2003, Roux, 2009). Professional teachers and schools could not associate with the new policy because they did not relate to a hermeneutical circle of understanding post-modern curriculum development, where teachers need to

understand "*the text, the lived experiences and the self in relation to the Other*" (Slattery, 2009:141; Roux, 2009a).

Conclusion

In my arguments and the tables of the research undertaken during the past 20 years, indicated that the concept of safe spaces has many meanings on different levels. The question however is how can religious education in faith-based schools, public schools; and we as researchers in RiE and RaE remember that the *education world out there* requires a type of learner, student and teacher that will cope with the needs of every individual and in different contexts. I think we all do realize that many faith-based schools or public schools, with a specific religious ethos, cannot guarantee a learner that will cope easily with belief systems other than their own. New teaching-learning approaches in faith-based schools hardly eradicate the religious, cultural and social differences, discrimination, homophobia or religious xenophobia. Critics of inter-religious and multi-religious education state that these initiatives have plunged our education system deeper into the abyss, but this will not change with only a re-introduction of faith-based schools. If critical thinking and creating spaces where deliberations on challenging the tradition is tolerable, it might change the consequences that fundamentalism can become part of the moral fiber of a society. Many examples exist on the African continent where religious convictions are intertwined with legislation. Social and economic unrest are sometimes based on homophobia and laymen's interpretations of Christian principles. One then needs to carefully reconsider the outcome of religious indoctrination in schools where there is no hermeneutical interpretations of religious texts. Having said this, my main concern is when faith-based schools become the center point of our understanding of religious diversity we may infuse an artificial safe space where confrontation with the environment (social order out there) cannot take place. After re-assessing my own research projects, I am questioning now, more than before, the ability of critical engagements and rigor debates on religious diversity at any faith-based school or mono-religious curriculum. We must recognize the value and the voices of our history in education, and need to reconstruct a new dimension in understanding the diversity of the *here* and *now* – without blurring our awareness and *challenges of the future*.

In terms of Foucault's notion of power relations (Ball, 1990), 'voice' could be considered as an expression of agency meaning that individual teachers could either entrench or change the religious dogma and the view the next generation will have of RE in the South Africa's history.

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