RECONCEPTUALISING THE INTERFACE OF RELIGION AND SCHOOL VIOLENCE TOWARDS CONSTRUCTION OF SUSTAINABLE LEARNING ECOLOGIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

B Dube (Corresponding author)

Post-doctoral research fellow

University of the Free State

D Hlalele

University of the Free State

Abstract

In this paper, we respond to the call by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013:10) to unmask, resist and destroy violence in the school context. Unmasking is indispensable, since violence produces a world order that can be unremitting and characterised by deceit, hypocrisy and lies. To achieve this release from a violent order, we advocate for the reconceptualisation of religion, so that school violence can be contested from a hybridised or multi-religious perspective to complement existing narratives to curtail school violence. The paper is grounded in critical emancipation research, of which the prime purpose is to challenge exclusion and social injustice, which often result in school violence. We conclude by arguing that school violence frustrates efforts to construct sustainable learning ecologies, and school violence must be challenged through religion-based discourses oriented to social justice.

Key words: Religion, school violence, sustainable learning environments.

1. BACKGROUND: VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

Most schools in South Africa have become highly volatile and unpredictable places (Zulu, Urbani, Van der Merwe and Van der Walt, 2004:173) due to violence that is a portent of the social order. The situation is worsening by the day, and obliges stakeholders to collaborate in an attempt to eliminate the social pathology of violence, which risks making schools sites of trepidation, instead of acquisition of knowledge. Consequently, Fishbaugh, Berkeley and Schroth (2003:19) point out that both teachers and learners see school as dangerous sites that disturb learning process. These circumstances erode young people's sense of hope and optimism, and their ability to cope with adversity and the difficulties they face growing up in a particular social and economic environment (Burton and Leoschut, 2013:4). Furthermore, Musango (2004:993) argues that violence in schools creates a culture of insults, threats, harassment, frustration, resentment and anger. School violence cannot be romanticised, as it endangers learners instead of protecting them.

There are numerous recorded and unrecorded incidents of school violence in South Africa. In this paper, we note a few examples to illustrate the challenges caused by violence in South African schools, which evoke the need for educational stakeholders to propose sustainable solutions. School violence that erupted at Masibambane in Kraaifontein in July 2015 left learners traumatised (Fredericks, 2015). In this case, gangsters armed with pangas (machetes)and home-made weapons had entered the school premises and caused havoc. It is not surprising that this incident lead to learners, educators and parents considering the school as an unsafe environment for the learners and the educators. Referring to incidents of

school violence in South Africa, with particular reference to the Western Cape, Van der Merwe (2015) notes that shooting is one of the common forms of school violence in the Western Cape. Incidents of shooting cause learners to miss classes and avoid sporting activities due to fear. The consequence of students missing classes is that communities remain with high illiteracy levels, which compounds the problems of rurality (Hlalele, 2013:564).

The effects of school violence is not limited to learners and educators, but has extended to affect the school infrastructure, such as the classrooms. In 2016, a number of schools were burnt down in Vuwani in the Limpopo province of South Africa (Sello, 2016). Destruction of school facilities affected the teaching and learning process negatively. Vuwani is a rural area, and the disadvantages learners in rural communities face compared to their urban counterparts were compounded by this destruction. According to the Whittles (2016), 25 schools have been torched so far, with at least 19 of these razed. McCauley (2016) reports that rebuilding schools will cost the government more than R400 million, which will have to be channelled from other developmental projects.

While funding of schools by the government is appreciated, Solomon (2012:15) is of the view that too many high schools still lack the funding, personnel, and technological infrastructure to provide learners with rigorous high-level coursework, which is a prerequisite for career success. Therefore, there is need for stakeholders oriented to achieving peace and justice to propose solutions that can mitigate the challenge of school violence. It is against this background that we propose the

reconceptualisation of the study of religion to complement ex-
isting efforts to address the school violence that creates an
atmosphere of fear and apprehension, and interferes with
learners' ability to learn (Burton & Leoschut 2013:xii-xiii). In
light of school violence, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) is right to call
for a struggle against school violence.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL EMANCI-
    PATORY RESEARCH

The arguments presented by this paper are embedded in crit-
ical emancipatory research, a theoretical framework that is
vigilant and sensitive to the menaces of inequity, social injus-
tice, lack of freedom, lack of peace and of hope (Mahloma-
holo & Netshandama, 2010:10), which may impel learners to
engage in violence. In addition, the framework was chosen
for this study largely because it responds to "historical and
social conditions of crisis and work[s] towards transformation
of the existing social structures [of school violence] and re-
place[s] them with emancipatory ones" (Sinnerbrink,
2012:370). It is a framework that "aims at deciphering practi-
cal problems by critical thinking and the use of knowledge
which is free from superstition and prejudice" (Steinvorth,
2008:400) and generating school relations that address the
differences between people (learners, teachers and other
stakeholders) through non-violent approaches. The frame-
work has roots in the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School
of 1923 and emerged as a quest to move "toward the possi-
bilities of democratic politics and emancipation" (Anderson,
2011:35), and seeks to eliminate injustice, exclusion and dis-
crimination (Tiniolatti, 2009:372) that may encourage school
violence. The framework is suitable for this paper due to its
emphasis on a response nurtured by progressive human and
faith groups, which supports inherent human dignity through
the hybridity of actors who are on a quest to establish a just

society (Brady, 2010:8). We chose this framework, concurring with Nkoane (2015:34), that it shares a counter-hegemonic stance that disrupts the mainstream understanding that religion has no place in the education of a child; instead it argues that religion, like other social theories, brings social justice, hope, democracy, emancipation, inclusion and equity, which are necessary to ensure safe schools.

3.   SUSTAINABLE LEARNING ECOLOGIES

Violence in schools disrupts an attempt to create sustainable learning ecologies, which are requirements for schools to become centres of lifelong learning (Kuuskorpi and González, 2011:1). Sustainable learning ecologies recognise the need to engage different stakeholders with many different interests in society in order to address problematic learning issues (Cloud, 2005:2), such as school violence. Sustainable learning ecologies are not essentially about the environment, but rather about the capacity of human society to enact permanent reform in order to safeguard the delicate balance between humans and their natural life-support system (Hamm and Muttagi, 1998:2). Furthermore, it affords all learners, all teachers, all members of the parent community and the whole of civil society equal opportunities to live, to work, to learn and to be innovative among others, away from oppression and marginalisation, but in freedom, peace and harmony with one another (Mahlomaholo, 2012:77). This understanding will, according to Nkoane (2015:35), not only transform social status, and schools, but revive, rebirth and renew learners' identity as people. School violence in South Africa frustrates the quest for sustainable learning ecologies, because schools are war zones, street-fighting centres and, in some cases, murder scenes. It is in light of this that we argue that religion, with its

moral impetus, has the potential to mitigate these challenges, consequently creating safe learning zones for all learners.

4. REMOVING RELIGION FROM SCHOOLS

Some people believe that the South African government acted in accordance with what is expected of governments when it intervened, as an ostensibly impartial facilitator, in the debate about religion in public education. The question remains, however, whether justice was served by the stipulations of the policy to remove religion from public schools (Van der Walt, 2011:388). Excluding religion from school can be interpreted as hegemonic dominance in circles of knowledge construction, which is a political battle in which the discursive weapons of knowledge and power are used, and which determines what is worthwhile knowledge for inclusion and exclusion (Nkoane, 2015:39). This is mooted by Bernstein (1970:47), who states that the way "a society selects, clarifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principle of social control". Hence, Young (2014:823) argues that it is those with more power in society who have access to and who force certain kinds of knowledge on others. Sustainable learning ecologies informed by social justice challenges hegemony in educational policies and practices, and advocates educational reform and societal structures that move towards equity rather than marginalisation (Mahlomaholo, Nkoane and Ambrosio, 2013:viii).

Therefore, we argue that the amputation of religion from schools echoes hegemonic force, which should be challenged, since the displacement of religion (arguably also expatriated morality in schools) opens the door to school violence. In short, the removal of religion from schools is best summarised by Nkoane (2015:37), who notes that dominant

ideologies portray other ways of knowing and knowledge construction as deficient and non-rigorous. For unknown political reasons of dominance in knowledge construction, some forms of knowing have been devalued, delegitimised and marginalised. We therefore agree with Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), who states that forms of dominance that lead to violence must be unmasked and challenged. Through advocating for the teaching of religion, we become part of the struggle to mitigate school violence.

With this in mind, it is clear that religion inevitably finds itself in tension with various manifestations of power and authority (Raiser, 2013:18). While the study of religion in schools had its fair share of problems, its removal did not address social inequality, social injustice and racial discrimination, which are generally cited as the reasons for school violence. The increase in school violence reflects the inadequacy of the school curriculum to cultivate in learners the values of love, caring, tolerance and working together in harmony, which could be embedded through the teaching and learning of religion. Burton (2008:17) asserts that schools are generally seen as mechanisms to develop and reinforce positive citizens with pro-social attitudes and as sites where individuals are prepared for the role they are to play in society at large. This could be the case, though the reality at schools indicates that most learners are not prepared well to become active citizens who shun violence and value human life. Our proposal to advocate for the reconceptualisation of religion into mainstream curriculum practice, with the aim of reigniting morality among learners in order to achieve safe schools, is based on the observation by Keast (200714) that,

> The erosion of the religion in the educational landscape does not mean the end of the personal and social function of religious beliefs, while religion may no longer determine

> the way education is run, nevertheless it continues to play a key role which is not necessarily limited to the private sphere.

The observation by Keast (2007) requires educationists to rethink the displacement of religion, and the effects of this displacement on the moral development of learners, since religion continues to play a significant role in people's lives. Reconceptualising religion as part of the solution to the problem of violence should be seen as an attempt to motivate all members of the community who are subject to social justice, to collaborate to create safe environments for learners. Eliminating religion from the school system, especially considering its role in the moral development of learners, is against the spirit of social inclusion and justice, and elimination may, in turn, increase school violence.

5. RECONCEPTUALISATION OF RELIGION TO ADDRESS VIOLENCE

Religion as referenced in this paper does not imply a particular faith or confession. The term is used in its generic sense to imply various groups that have beliefs in God, are legal, have representatives in South Africa and have the desire to address school violence through various harmonious narratives. Reconceptualising religion implies that educationists and religious leaders need to come together and assemble various pedagogical issues that can be taught to learners with the intention of directly and pointedly addressing school violence, good citizenship, and tolerance, and embracing difference and peaceful resolution of difference, which seems to be inadequately addressed by the current school curriculum. Collaboration to improve school conditions affirms critical emancipation research that is geared to achieve social transformation for social cohesion and homogeneity.

By reconceptualising religion, educationists and religious leaders hybridise to eliminate the conflicts and challenges that could have led to the removal of the subject from the mainstream curriculum in 2008. This could be possible if religious leaders and educationists honestly value education, the lives of the learners, and educators. This rethinking also implies that religious leaders and educators understand that the teaching and learning of religion should not be for dogmatic, conversion and confessional purposes, but should have the aim of instilling religious values that help learners to relate to one another in non-violent ways. This aim requires religious personnel to moderate their personal religious views with the intention of promoting peaceful coexistence. According to Kreimer (2015:18) moderation does not mean that one must repress or conceal one's religious identity, but rather that it should be expressed in a way that does not impede mutual respect and sharing with others and does not place a particular religious group at an advantage or disadvantage. This approach will enable the education system to benefit from religion and to mitigate school violence.

6.   **How can religion address school violence?**

It is becoming inevitable for educators who support social justice and peace to begin to find different solutions to end the problem of school violence. Our proposal to integrate religion as part of the solution to mitigate school violence is an attempt to complement efforts by the Department of Basic Education to create safe schools, e.g., National School Safety Framework. Religion has the potential to change the school environment because of its inherent potential to transform circumstances that could lead to violence. Over the centuries, religion has been one of the social institutions that has influenced

human behaviour for good and for bad. Reconceptualising religion would enable educators to focus on the positive aspects of religion that can influence behaviour in a positive sense. In 2008 it may have been desirable to remove religion from public schools to achieve democracy and social inclusion. However, religion has continued to influence educators and learners, hence, totally disregarding the role it plays in the formation of morality among learners does it a disservice in the quest to nurture learners to acquire social responsibility.

6.1   Religion promotes social justice and equity

Social justice is based on the idea of a society that ensures fair treatment and a just share of the benefits of society for individuals and groups (Monychenda, 2008:19). The focus on social justice is necessitated by the fact that violence often occurs as a result of violations of justice. Learners are sensitive to issues of social injustice that may happen at schools, which may cause them to engage in violent approaches to addressing social differences. All major religions share a foundation based on tenets of social justice – religions teach their followers to show compassion, wisdom and love. Consequently, social justice should be seen as countering dominant power relations by encouraging the individual telling of stories, thereby allowing people in different geo-socio-political and (religious) spaces, who are usually assumed to be without "legitimate" scientific stories, to be at the centre rather than on the periphery of addressing problems, in this case, school violence (Nkoane, 2015:35). In support of this observation, Mahlomaholo et al. (2013:xiii) confirm that social justice challenges hegemony in educational policies and practices, and advocates for educational reform and societal structures that move towards equity rather than marginalisation, as is the case with religion in mainstream education. So-

cial justice demands that people have equal rights and opportunities; everyone, from the poorest person on the margins of society to the wealthiest, deserves an even playing field (Hlalele, 2013:567). It is under these conditions that we join the struggle suggested by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), of resisting and unmasking school violence that produces a world order that is sustainable through lies and deceit.

By embracing social justice as promoted by religious narratives, we can achieve a just and a non-violent society (Monychenda, 2008:7). The pursuit of social justice implies a need for peace and a curriculum that addresses the lived realities of the learners. This curriculum must be oriented to cultivating values that promote social justice and peaceful coexistence, and religion has the potential to contribute to achieving justice and peace. We advocate for religion by concretising an observation by Monychenda (2008:7), that establishing social justice and peace means respecting human and civil rights and eliminating social violence that threatens the lives of learners. In addition, social justice contributes to the creation of sustainable learning ecologies that are often disrupted by violence and many other factors.

6.2   Religion promotes morality

The fact that learners are not taught about morality, especially from a religious point of view, is one of the causes of school violence, which must be addressed if we are concerned about the welfare and education of learners, especially in schools. We argue that crime and violence pose severe threats to the fragile democracy, peace, and economic stability of South Africa; it corrupts the social fabric of communities and endangers the health of both learners and educators; it disrupts the provision of basic services and destroys respect for human rights (Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya, 2014:49).

The effects of violence are likely to persist in society as long as the morality of learners, community members and educators is not addressed. Religious teachings give moral impetus that is capable of uniting disparate segments of society, in the process bridging barriers of ethnicity, race, class, gender, family and nationality (Mwaura, 2008:5). Acquiring morality enables "learners to see through the spectacles of other cultures and develop an empathetic understanding of another culture, consequently, learners become ready to empathise with other cultures" (Almirzanah, 2014:239), which, in the process, will reduce school-related violence. Morality shapes the attitudes and values of individuals and societies in terms of social behaviour, economic activity and political involvement (Mtata, 2012:12). The implication is that the education system that ignores the morality of the learners, deprives the society of values such as democracy, peace and tolerance. A curriculum that negates education for morality is geared to have immoral citizens who disregard and endanger people who are different and militate against sustainable development of learners.

6.3   Religion promotes peaceful coexistence

Through religion, peace has been achieved and wars have been fought. This observation is echoed by Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana (2009:175) who state that "religion has been thought of as playing a crucial role in generating conflicts, particularly internal ones. While it may be a source of conflict, its role in the overall peace process has all too often been overlooked". In this paper, we focus on the ability of religion to promote peace – a role that the education system in South Africa has relegated to the periphery, thereby making it impossible for learners to limit aggression. Religion enables learners and educators to listen to the voice of their consciences and to invent the instruments of law that overcome

or limit the tendency to hurt one another (Huber, 2010:53). This could be because, as claimed by Preis and Russell (2006:5), within various "religious traditions exist an underlying thread of unity connecting the great religious traditions. They each propound basic spiritual tenets and standards of behaviour that constitute the essence of social cohesion for peaceful co-existence". Peace is cultured in religion, and Kadayifici-Orellana (2003:33) observes that "religious authorities and educators are peace oriented, able to open channels of communication that are geared towards peace-building initiatives across the educational, social, political, and economic spectrum". Through a reconceptualised religion, learners and educators come together, and discuss matters that affect their lives and develop processes to address issues and concerns" (Rasul, 2009:3) through non-violent means. It is our belief that this can be effectively achieved at the school level (Herstad, 2006:9).

Following religious texts attest to the claim that religions are oriented to peace, hence justifying the inclusion of religion in the curriculum with the aim of promoting responsible citizenship and peace efforts, and ending school violence.

> "O Mankind, we have created you male and female, and have made you races and tribes, that you may know each other." (*The Qur'an*, Surah al-Hujurat 49:13)

> "Seek peace and pursue it… Seek it where you are and pursue it in other places as well." (*The Bible,* Ps. KJV 34:15)

> "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you." (*The Bible,* KJV Matt. 5:44).

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> "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." (*The Bible,* KJV 1 Corinthians 1:10)

> Help and not fight, assimilation and not destruction, harmony and peace and not dissension are the substance of my faith." Swami Vivekananda (Hinduism)

Given the references from religious texts, it is clear that discounting the religious dimension or resisting engagement with religious actors disregards opportunities to tap into religion as a force for compassion and one that can promote peace (USAID, 2009:7). In short, "by overlooking religious differences and uniting under belief in the existence of a divine being, learners can strive for humanitarian equality and peace … [as] not just rhetoric but a reality" (Khaled, 2007:9). If we fail to do this, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) reminds us, we are geared to live in a social order that is maintained through lies and deceit.

6.4   Religion promotes social transformation

In this paper social transformation is defined from the perspective of Mwaura (2008:4), who explains that it refers to a change in the social arrangements of a group or society, replacing existing social arrangements with peace-oriented strategies. Sharing these sentiments, Khondker and Schuerkens (2014:1) argue that social transformation implies a fundamental change in society, which can be contrasted with social change viewed as gradual or incremental changes over a period of time. Religion acts as an interventionistic approach to addressing social issues that disrupt traditional teaching and learning practices, such as school violence, and current social conditions, inherited from the past, and their

limits (Smit, 2004:7). To assist with this transformation process and to incorporate people fully, Hlalele (2013:570) arguest hat participatory tendencies provide a useful approach to appreciating the views and skills of religious people and for formulating locally appropriate development strategies. When all people, including religious leaders, are enabled to participate meaningfully, also in schools, to eradicate violence, then sustainability of people's livelihoods is ensured (Mahlomohalo et al., 2012:vii), and schools become safe places where children can learn.

6.5 The positive influence of religious leaders

To address the challenge of violence, religion, and especially its leaders, have the capacity to offer communities strategies that can make schools safe sites that promote sustainable learning ecologies. Religious leaders, as community spokespersons, are often successful in mobilising for positive social change (Herstad, 2007:7) that can mitigate violent tendencies of learners at schools. Religious leaders are well positioned to educate others on how to overcome the devastating effects of violence (Religion for Peace, 2007:16), with the aim of "solving practical problems by critical thinking and the use of knowledge which is free from superstition and prejudice" (Steinvorth, 2008:400). Under normal circumstances religious leaders bear a great responsibility to educate worshippers on central tenets of faith and ways they can live in harmony with their beliefs (Herstad, 2007:14). Engaging religion and key religious actors in conflict-prone settings can provide unique opportunities for intervention in ongoing conflicts, or to reduce the risk that may propel violence (USAID, 2009:5).

Engagement of religious leaders to assist learners to achieve peaceful resolution of differences is in line with the theoretical

framework that seeks hybridisation of stakeholders to collaborate to address issues such as school violence. Gone are the days that we could assume that teachers and parents have the responsibility of infusing values of peaceful existence among learners, and that people who are not directly involved in education, such religious leaders, cannot contribute to the development of learners. In fact, the war against school violence can be won through partnership with peace-oriented people, including religious leaders. Engagement with and encouragement of religious leaders can provide expert support to youths and facilitate disengagement and de-radicalisation (Schmid, 2013:9). The education system can also take advantage of faith networks and work across faiths to remind communities that school violence violates dignity and human rights (Herstad, 2007:7). This claim is echoed by USAID (2009:6), that argues that religious organisations and their leaders are uniquely positioned to facilitate post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation efforts, due to the trust and moral authority they hold from broad-based constituencies. Because they are trusted and respected in their communities, their involvement lends credibility to the process and, more importantly, provides a positive example for members of their communities (Rasul, 2009:7) to deal with violence. Furthermore, people in general still embrace religion as source of survival, which makes involving religious leaders in school engagement for peace a laudable effort for addressing school violence.

We support the reflection by Wani, Abdullah and Chang (2015:650), that religious leaders, educators, political leaders, think tanks, and academic institutions play an important role in transforming and reconciling conflicts if they work with integrity by genuinely believing that human blood is costly and

the education of children is important. It is against this understanding that religious leaders and the study of religion should be infused in mainstream curriculum practice – to assist existing efforts to achieve behaviour change, respect, tolerance, and a non-armed approach to conflict resolution. Generally, most religions, as observed by Preis and Russell (2006:15-16), "convey a message of peace, justice and human solidarity". The observation by Ndlovu (2013) that school violence must be resisted because it produces a world of deceit, lies and hypocrisy correlates with the message of peace and social justice championed by religions, and supported by teaching values, such as honesty.

7. RE-ENGAGING RELIGION: VIOLENCE-RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

In light of the need to mitigate violence in schools and, in the process, creating safe schools for learners and educators, it important that religion is reconceptualised and re-engaged with at school level to allow "learners to embrace the politics of personal difference, that often causes school violence, which enforces a certain level of social cohesion for the maintenance of public order" (Bangura, 1994:1). We agree with the observation of Kadayifici-Orellana (2003:32), that "religious commitment can become a strong impetus for engaging in peace- building activities and bringing about social change". Re-engaging religion in the mainstream curriculum will enable learners to embrace the politics of difference through peaceful resolution of differences, which can cascade to institutions of higher learning, which have, in response to various social pathologies, become the breeding ground for violence.

The re-engagement and rethinking of the role of religion is a response we propose in light of Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2013) observation (that school violence must be unmasked and challenged), which is geared to promote tolerance in schools and acceptance of others, and reciprocity that depends on the kind of educational approaches used (Kreimer, 2015:34). A schooling system that addresses the lived realities of learners must start seriously considering integrating religion to promote values, such as openness to the other, respect for differences, mutual understanding, active tolerance, validating existing cultures, providing equal opportunities and fighting discrimination (Kreimer, 2015:36). This type of curriculum will enable learners to engage positively regarding race, gender, and diversity in general. We want classrooms that enable learners to become thoughtful and caring citizens of tomorrow (Nkosi, 2015). It is through this understanding that learners will come to consider school as a safe place, where their dreams, often shattered by poverty and political marginalisation, can be realised. Normalising school violence is a tragedy for learners and, consequently, affects their prospects for creating sustainable learning ecologies.

8. CONCLUSION

The paper argued that religion has the impetus to transform the South African schooling system, which is one that is generally marred by violence. Religion, through its moral teachings, can contribute to social transformation and creating safe schools. Reconceptualising religion will help to eliminate the trajectories that lead to religion being eliminated from the curriculum. Negating religion in the curriculum serves as a social injustice to religious people, and also robs learners of the moral teachings offered by religion. In conclusion, religion can contribute to safe schools in South Africa

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