

Transitioning from a Religious to a Secular State: The teaching of Religious and Moral Education in Namibian schools

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the importance of teaching Religious and Moral Education (RME) in the Namibia education system while honoring the Namibia Constitution. RME introduces learners to different religious beliefs and traditions, as well as to the moral values of those religions. It provides opportunities for learners to become aware of their own responses to the current moral, social and religious issues, as well as to reflect on their own beliefs and moral values. At the same time, RME challenges learners and helps them to be more receptive to other religions and to culturally diverse societies (Iita, 2012), as provided by the Namibian democratic Constitution. This position paper reviews literature on the importance of teaching RME in Namibia schools while taking into consideration the Namibia Constitution which allows the teaching of different religions in school. The authors of this paper believe that RME sets high moral standards and values and encourages a society where learners' lived experiences must be measured against commonly accepted religious norms and values. Knowledge gained from studying RME enables learners to view issues in different ways. Since this is a position paper, findings might not represent the feelings of all the Namibian people about the teaching of RME in Namibian schools. However, as people have different views regarding the teaching of RME in schools, this study will contribute toward people understands of other religions, to accept and to tolerate religious diversity.*

Keywords - Religious and Moral Education (RME), Curriculum, Constitution, Morality

Research Area: Social Science

Paper Type: Literature Review

1. INTRODUCTION

The introduction of RME into the Namibian school curriculum after Namibia's independence in 1990 has become a topic of great debate in Namibia society. Over the past 25 years, some members of society feel that there was no need for the introduction of RME in the Namibian curriculum. However, Article 1.1 of the Namibian Constitution stated that: "The Republic of Namibia is hereby established as a sovereign, secular, and unitary State" (p. 2), not connected with spiritual or religious matters. Further, Fundamental freedoms, under Article 21, stated that all persons shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and beliefs. Thus, the Constitution safeguards the rights of individuals and their respective religions (Constitution of The Republic of Namibia, 1989). With the new Constitution, the state adopted a policy of teaching a multi-cultural religious and moral education (Lubbe, 1997, p. 17; Constitution of The Republic of Namibia, 1989), and with this Constitution, the teaching of RME was introduced, replacing Biblical Studies in the Namibian curriculum. Teachers are now required to teach and make their learners aware of multiple religious faiths and moral values of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, African traditional religions, Bahai and others (Schultz, 2001, p. 4).

Within a secular state such as the one guaranteed by the Namibian Constitution, it is quite likely that teachers in Government schools may have learners from religious backgrounds very different from their own. There may also be learners belonging to non-religious groups. However, it remains the teacher's duty to make learners aware of morals and values regardless of their religion in a way that education helps learners to accept people with different value systems and help them develop and understand their own personal value systems. It is the right and responsibility of teachers and learners to exercise their religious freedom, but at the same time they should be tolerant of the religious views of others. The aim of the RME syllabus is to help teachers teach learners to accept and live by the values, morality and spirituality found within their respective religions and/or beliefs. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture (1991) every Namibian is challenged to turn this country into an example of morality, spirituality and tolerance to the rest of the world.

2. AIMS OF THE RME CURRICULUM

RME enable learners to:

- Understand their religious beliefs and practices;
- Understand themselves and the changing multicultural world in which they are growing up; and
- Understand and accept the diversity of religious beliefs and practices in the wider community (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1991).
- Develop learners who would respect and foster the values of the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia while developing respect for and understanding and tolerance of other people's religions, beliefs, cultures and ways of life (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2007).

Based on the above RME aims, it is deduced that RME is more inclusive, since it embraces the study of multiple religions and perspectives on morality. It is expanded to include a focus on Judaism, Christianity, Islam and African traditional religions. In this way, RM teaches learners to live in a society that is characterized by both religious and cultural diversity (Knitter, 1985, p. 206).

3. BENEFIT OF STUDYING RME

RME integrate various themes at various levels of the curriculum. These include belonging, phases of life, the sacred, festivals, social values and children's rights and responsibilities (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2005). Themes on Judaism, African Traditional Religions, and Christianity are part of the school upper primary phase (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2007). For the junior secondary, curriculum themes focused on Islam, the Bahai faith, Buddhism, and Hinduism (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2007).

RME takes into consideration the moral and ethical development of a learner; encourages respect for feelings and opinions of other faiths and demonstrates that problems can be solved by working together (Reimer, Paolitto & Hersh 1983, p. 123). Thus, Religious and Moral Education encourage a culture of tolerance, where the rights of different religions and morals should be respected and promoted (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2004).

Tony (2001) stated that “Religious Education involves instruction in beliefs and practices” (p. 207). Moreover, it is an education aimed at helping learners to respect and have knowledge and understanding of other’s faiths and cultures, attempting to create a peaceful community where various religious groups live in harmony (Baelz, 1977, p. 67). In a similar manner the Ministry of Education and Culture argued that learners from different religious and cultural groups should share religious experiences and religious responsibilities; express their own spirituality and morality differently and teachers should assist them to work through ethical problems, learn to live with high moral standards and draw comfort and hope from religion (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1996).

Reimer et al. (1983) argued that “when religious and moral issues arise in the classroom or outside the classroom, they should be addressed to help learners develop religious and moral respect” (p. 4). Seeing that religion and morality are major forces in the lives of the people, RME teachers should educate learners in religious and moral issues concerning humanity, honesty in dealing with one another, respect for property and other people’s religion, and encourage learners to share their religious and moral experiences, knowledge and skills in the classroom and outside the classroom. Such process would lead to the appreciation of the differences in our religious groups, and the success of democracy.

Reimer et al. (1983) states that “learners acquire religious and moral values from their social environment; an experience that might be useful in teaching and learning situations” (p. 45). One should also take note that religious and moral values differ from person to person, and from community to community; however, some values are universal, such as a common recognition of the value of life and a common concern for preserving human life (Reimer et al. 1983, p. 36).

RME has both cognitive (knowledge) value and affective dimensions (feelings and attitudes which benefit individuals and the community). The authors of this paper believe that the subject helps people to understand their own culture and history, and helps people become more aware of the existence of God/gods while encouraging the development of religious and

moral values and a spirit of humanness in life. In situations where learners only prepare for careers without the benefit of RME, life skills are lacking.

RME sets high moral standards and values and encourages a society where learners’ lived experiences must be measured against commonly accepted religious norms and values. For Namibians living in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society, the study of RME helps develop attitudes of respect, tolerance and acceptance. Knowledge gained from the study of RME also enables learners to view issues in different ways, which helps to avoid situations where ignorance of different customs and beliefs might lead to societal ill will. Thus, the study of RME should, and must contribute towards minimizing misunderstandings between various religious, culture and political viewpoints within and beyond Namibia.

4. CONCLUSION

The Namibian Constitution allows the teaching of a multi-cultural religious and moral education. The purpose of introducing RME in the curriculum was to develop knowledge on

the diversity of religious beliefs as a source of moral education. The authors of this article concur that RME should be taught in school because moral values are important in life as morals are universal to all people regardless of the religious groups they belong to.

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