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TRANSFORMATIVE CONFLICT MEDIATION IN MULTI-FAITH SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICA

ABSTRACT

Contradictions and contestations regarding the implementation of religion policies have become a worldwide phenomenon. Research suggests an increasing number of costly and protracted court and legislative battles between schools and parents over religion in schools. In this article, I aim to highlight some of the conflicting issues that need to transform while implementing the National Policy on Religion and Education of 2003 in selected South African schools. Based on mediation theory, the study used individual interviews to gather data from twelve purposively selected school principals to investigate how they implemented the religion policy in their respective schools. The findings show that despite the implementation challenges of this policy, most of the school principals displayed the qualities of a transformative mediator by transforming conflicting religious interests of stakeholder groupings in their schools from destructive to constructive. I therefore recommend that universities should consider training school principals in the use of transformative mediation as a strategy to transform conflicts in schools as it holds potential benefits for fields such as education.

Keywords: *Conflict transformation, mediation, implementing policy change, religion in education, South Africa*

1. INTRODUCTION

In terms of Section 15(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (hereafter referred to as the Constitution), 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 for 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. In line with the Constitution, Section 16(1) of the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 (RSA, 1996b) vests the *governance* of every public school in its school governing body (hereafter SGB) and it may perform only such functions and obligations as specified in the same



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Act. The Act categorically allocates the *professional management* of the public school to the school principal (hereafter referred to as the principal), who is accountable to the provincial Head of Department (Sec. 16 [3]). What this means is that the SGB of a school is responsible for the determination of its policies, for making recommendations on staff appointments and for its financial management, while the daily running of the school (professional management) resides with the principal and his/her school management team (SMT).

The irony in the national and provincial policy implementation process is that, school policies, whether language, admission or religion, must be developed within a potentially polarised situation, where various stakeholder groupings may want to influence the process and outcome. The policies cannot and may not be developed in a lacuna; they must be framed within the requirements of the Constitution, existing legislation and with due attention to other policies or expectations of national and provincial departments of education and other interest groups (RSA, 1996b). It is important however, to mention that since the promulgation of SASA, potentially conflicting occurrences regarding not only parental powers but also the demarcation of governance and professional management roles and responsibilities in practice have been reported (Xaba, 2004). Key among these is the challenge of interpreting and translating national and provincial legislation and educational policies into school policies. This poses serious challenges for principals, especially in terms of their leadership roles (Hallinger, 2010). The situation has not only led to protracted court cases but has also negatively affected the quality of education (Heystek, 2011).

2. CONFLICT AND ITS ORIGIN

Conflict is inevitable in a school, similar to any social arena. Putting into perspective implementation of policy in the South African school, conflict can manifest itself in at least three ways. First, separation of roles and responsibilities of the SGB (*governance*) and SMT (*management*) of which the principal is a member in both structures, has potential to fuel conflict. Second, like other human beings, members of the SGB, for instance, have diverse ideas, interests and goals, values, beliefs and opinions about the need for and nature of school governance (Van Der Merwe, Prinsloo & Steinmann, 2003) and such differences have the potential to fuel conflict. The third and *intra-conflict* is with the principal (own emphasis added). In his/her position as the ex-officio of the provincial Department of Education (hereafter referred to as the department), the principal is accountable to both parties – the department and SGB. In this way, he/she finds himself/herself caught in the middle of the two: one with the power to dismiss him/her (the department) and the other in a position to undermine his/her authority and make his/her life miserable (the SGB) (Clarke, 2007).

For the purpose of this article and based on the illustration of conflict manifestations above, I view conflict as opposing ideas, goals, interests, perceptions or opinions within an individual or between parties through a behaviour or actions that weaken oneself or parties under play. Conflict could have a positive and a negative effect on the policy implementation depending on the way it is led (Okotoni & Okotoni, 2003). It becomes *negative* (destructive) when it draws attention away from other important activities, undermines morale or self-esteem, polarises people and groups, reduces cooperation, increases or sharpens difference and leads to irresponsible and harmful behaviour, such as fighting, name-calling and so forth (Dhiaulhaq *et al.*, 2017; Yasmi *et al.*, 2013). Suspension of learners from schools because they are said to violate the school's code of conduct in terms of religious observances including attire and symbols; denying admission of learners to schools because of their religious belief systems

and practices; forcing learners to observe religions other than theirs are few examples of the effects of destructive conflicts (see MEC for Education: KwaZulu-Natal v Navaneethum Pillay 2008 [1] SA 474 [CC]).

Conflict is positive (*constructive*) and is also referred to as “conflict transformation” when it results in the clarification of important problems and issues, generates solutions to problems, involves people in resolving issues important to them, promotes authentic communication, encourages cooperation between people and helps individuals develop greater understanding and/or additional skills (Dhialulhaqa, McCarthya & Yasmib, 2018). For example, the principal, SGB and teachers agree on religious observance strategies that can fairly accommodate almost all religious beliefs represented in the school. According to Reimann (2004) as well as Bush and Folger (2005), conflict is transformative when it promotes an opportunity for social change, aiming not only to stop the conflict but also to change the negative or destructive interaction to positive, constructive and humanising interaction by empowering parties and recognising shifts in their interaction. This then distinguishes “conflict transformation” from “conflict resolution” and “conflict management”. The former assumes that conflict is negative and should be resolved and ended without addressing the underlying causes of conflict while the latter comes with the assumption that conflict is complex and can never be resolved entirely; hence, the goal is to manage the conflict by avoiding destructive escalation and attaining positive outcomes for all parties (Kriesberg, 2011; Reimann, 2004). Bush and Folger (2005) and Augsburg (1992) suggest three indications of a transformed conflict:

- (a) *Transforming attitudes*: Emergence of “new” perceptions among the conflicting parties, based on a commitment to view each other in a spirit of goodwill and mutual respect.
- (b) *Transforming behaviours*: Parties focus on collaborative behaviour, including in their communication, and commit to mutually beneficial actions.
- (c) *Transforming conflict*: Parties attempt to remove incompatibilities to pursue mutual gains.

While some implementers follow conflict resolution, others opt for conflict management when implementing the religion policy in their schools. However, almost all principals in this study opted for conflict transformation with an understanding that the core aspect that they needed to transform was changes at the micro level (i.e. intrapersonal and interpersonal relationship) (Dhialulhaq *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, in an attempt to transform conflict, change agents use a number of approaches including negotiation, mediation, arbitration, adjudication and coercion (Yasmi *et al.*, 2011; Engel & Korf, 2005). In this article, I consider mediation and its potential for conflict transformation. I base this decision on the premise that the study underpinning this article found transformative mediation helpful to the conflicting parties to transform conflict (Engel & Korf, 2005). Similar studies also discovered transformative mediation as an effective tool not only for transforming conflict (Bercovitch & Gartner, 2006), but also for transforming social relationships and building peace (Porter & Bagshaw, 2009). What then is mediation and transformative mediation in particular?

3. TRANSFORMATIVE MEDIATION: A PROMISE FOR CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Many scholars define mediation differently depending on a theorist's point of view at a particular time. For example, scholars such as Engel and Korf (2005), Wall *et al.* (2001) and Moore (2003) understand mediation as an assisted negotiation process facilitated by a third party (or parties) that aims to assist the conflicting parties to find mutually acceptable solutions,

including by addressing the underlying causes of the conflict. From a slightly different point of view, Bush and Folger (1994) define mediation as a process in which a third party works with conflicting parties to help them change the quality of their interaction from negative and destructive to positive and constructive.

For the purpose of this article, I follow the definition by Bush and Foger (1995) for the following reasons. First, some scholars associate negotiation with mediation whereas the two are different processes. Scholars such as Scanzoni (1979) and Stevens (1958) see negotiation as a voluntary bargaining process whereby conflicting parties take the initiative to meet face-to-face to find a compromise. Whereas Dryzek and Hunter (1987) see mediation as a form of a third-party intervention where a mediator facilitates conflict transformation without imposing any solution. Additionally, some scholars believe that negotiation cannot be trusted for conflict transformation because of its weakness and unequal power to deal with complex and intense conflict (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2001). In contrast, mediation has the ability to facilitate collaborative integrative problem solving rather than adversarial distributive bargaining (Fisher & Ury, 1981). This serves as the reason why mediation is often the option where negotiation has failed (Yasmi *et al.*, 2010). Lastly, research suggests that during the negotiation process, a protracted destructive conflict often generates mistrust, fear, hostility and other emotions that deter actors from taking part and that often result in failure of the process (Katila, 2014). Contrary to this, Dhialulhaq *et al.* (2017) point out that within the mediation field, transformational approaches are increasingly prominent for practitioners and scholars.

My second reason is that, very often literature on mediation refers to a third “objective or neutral” party that is brought into the conflict situation to assist in its transformation (Schellenberg, Parks-Savage & Rehfuss, 2007; Boule, 2005; Domenici & Littlejohn, 2001). This is true for many of the different forms of conflict management. Based on Fullen’s (2007) claim that conflict transformation cannot be managed or controlled, but can merely be understood and led, I would, however, like to argue that only mediation ideally situates the principal as “an insider” within the SGB to perform the task of a mediator, provided that he/she is well-trained in this strategy. I base my argument on the fact that in his/her position as the head of the school, an ex-officio member of the department as well as an official member of the SGB, the principal is in an ideal position to understand conflict transformation in the way the school experiences it. Because of this, he/she stands in a good position to lead it in an amicable way.

Mediation serves two different purposes namely “problem-solving” and “transformative” mediation. The transformative approach is often put in contrast with a “problem-solving” or “settlement” approach, which emphasises generating a “resolution” in order to settle the conflict. In contrast, the transformative mediation model does not put resolution or consensus as the immediate priority (Dhialulhaq *et al.*, 2017). Instead and, as put by Bush and Folger (1994), for transformative mediation to reach “settlement of conflict” is only at most an incidental success measure. What counts most is empowering the parties (empowerment) and getting them to have a genuine appreciation of the other’s predicament (recognition), and transformative rather than problem-solving mediation has the potential to offer such. In other words, with the two capabilities (empowerment and recognition), transformative mediation does not only aim to transform conflict, but also to foster long-term relationships and cooperation (Katila *et al.*, 2014). In order for these capabilities to manifest during the transformative mediation process, Bush and Folger (2005) advocate for a “relational” rather than “individualism” framework

because a relational framework “sees the world as containing *both* the plurality of individual selves and the (potential) unity made up of the network of their relationships. It is therefore important to point out that the analysis of principals’ narratives as presented in this article embraces the relational and leaves aside the individualism framework. The next section then presents the methodology followed to gather principals’ narratives after which I present and discuss the findings.

4. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Research design

The study followed a phenomenological research design as informed by the qualitative research approach to explore the ways in which principals mediate religion education in their schools. I conducted individual interviews to solicit information from the principals regarding their experiences in implementing the religion policy in their schools (Saldaña, 2015). Research evidence suggests that not much is done on experiences of principals implementing the religion; hence, the reason behind the study employing a phenomenological research design. I intended to study the experiences that shape principals’ thoughts, actions and choice of strategy when implementing democratic policies such as the religion policy (Grey, 2014).

4.2 Selection of participants

I purposefully selected twelve principals as the sample for the study to avoid generalised findings. While this sample size may seem small, it is important to note that in qualitative research the focus is generally not on sample size, but rather on sample adequacy. The adequacy of my sample was justified by my reaching a point of sampling saturation (Fargher & Dooley, 2012), i.e. a point where no new information could be obtained from further data. Qualitative researchers regard that as an indication of quality (Guest, 2006). 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 a single occurrence of the data is potentially as useful as many, in understanding the process behind a topic (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003).

Qualitative research is concerned with meaning and not with making generalised hypothesis statements (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Since the principals were postgraduate students at a university, they participated in their private capacity and not as spokespersons of specific schools (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). In other words, they narrated their stories as they experienced the implementation of the religion policy and not in accordance with the expectations of their provincial departments of education. The principals (a) were engaged in leadership and management training at postgraduate level; b) had served in the departments of education for at least fifteen years; c) had been exposed to various religion policies prior to 1994, post-1994 and post-2003; and d) were from various religious orientations as well as language and cultural groupings.

Although their schools and school administration were not the focus of this study, it transpired that the principals worked in public and independent schools located in the northern regions of South Africa, namely Gauteng (seven), Limpopo (two), Mpumalanga (two), and KwaZulu-Natal (one). Despite the fact that the sample was from one region of the country and that can count as a limitation of the study, it provided a detailed perspective into the principals’ distinct leadership backgrounds and experiences. The study population was representative in

terms of gender, race and religion. Principals in this study came from three religions namely Hinduism (one), Islam (two) and Christianity (nine), and they comprised nine males and three females, two Whites, one Coloured, two Indians and seven Blacks. However, it must be clear that the participants' gender, province, historical origin or the type of school (secondary or primary) were not central to their selection.

4.3 Ethics considerations

I obtained approval from the Faculty Ethics Committee to involve the principals and postgraduate students in the study. In my position as the Research Assistant in the academic department to which participants were enrolled, I had access to the database of postgraduate students and was able to send invitations to those who were principals and deputy principals. I considered deputy principals worthy to participate, since they carry quite a similar mandate as principals. I then directed invitations to ten principals who had indicated their willingness and availability to participate in the study. Realising that e-mail would most likely not produce an adequate number of participants, I had to contact those that I knew to be principals directly, and two more agreed to participate in the study.

4.4 Data collection

I used narrative interviews to collect data, and I personally recorded, transcribed, analysed and interpreted principals' stories. Usually, the society either debates and discusses religious issues on a sentimental level or elevates them to litigation through the courts, as I stated in the introduction. That is to say, we rarely explore the subject scientifically. In an innovative approach, I used narrative inquiry to examine and understand principals' experiences of religion that were without emotion or sentiment. Understanding previous religious experiences of principals in this study allowed me an "insider view" that resulted in the illumination of real people in real settings through the "painting" of their stories (Haydon, Browne & van der Riet, 2018; Wang & Geale, 2015). Thus, I was able to probe further what principals like or dislike about the religion policy (Farrell, 2012).

4.5 Data analysis and trustworthiness of the results

It is important to mention that I initially identified categories that enabled me to collect and analyse, interpret and make conclusions about the data. The categories included the principals' understandings of their mediating role in the implementation of the religion policy (Babbie, 2014). I therefore transcribed the audio-recorded interviews and analysed the transcriptions in terms of the mentioned categories. From this, themes such as policy development, learner admissions and educator appointment, teaching about religion and religious observances emerged.

I used peer briefing to audit the raw data (audio-recorded interviews), interview transcripts, interview guides, list of participants and their profiles, as well as my field notes throughout the study period to validate their accuracy and authenticity. In addition, I sent transcriptions to the participants, asking them to correct factual errors. This ensured that I represented them and their ideas accurately (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). Finally, my promoter submitted the study to the similarity checker called "Turnitin", as per the university's requirements, to ensure its originality. Having presented the methodology carried out in the study that underpins this article, I then share the findings as I contextualise them within the transformative conflict mediation.

5. FINDINGS

In presenting the findings in this study, it is important to reiterate that the South African Schools Act of 1996 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. It also does not 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 situations such as those presented above, conflict is highly evident. It is therefore within these perimeters that I find the principal, being an “in-sider”, to be the best-positioned person to carry the role of transformative conflict mediator. Their interpretation and understanding of their role as they navigate within the policy implementation process is therefore presented below.

The principals in this study employed diverse strategies as they implemented the religion policy in schools and they attached a few reasons to that. While some blamed the lack of training from the department, others put fault on inadequate training. The lack of the necessary skills could be the reason for this challenge, which was claimed by Principal One: *“the policies just come and there are no people to unpack them”*. The narratives of the other participants indicate that, *“we were trained. For instance, we were told what was required of us and how to go about doing what we were expected to but we chose to ignore it”*, Principal Two stressed. According to Principal Six, 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 practise Christianity”*. Ironically, these principals sensed the conflict fuelled by the department with this policy. In a way, they tried to ignore it.

Releasing learners from Islam faith became a challenge to some principals in this study. Principal Nine stated, *“one of the completely strange things to me was the request by parents that we had to release 35 learners from the Islamic faith to leave for Mosque at 12:00 on Fridays”*. However, with others, this was never a challenge, all they needed was a confirmation letter from a parent. It was expressed by Principal Three that *“unless the parent comes and explains to us in a form of a letter from Mosque that the learner is actually a committed member of the Islamic faith and he should be permitted to attend mosque, we would not release such a learner to leave for Mosque”*. By interpretation, this practice may not be accommodative to Islam on the one side while protective on the other. According to Principal Seven, *“releasing learners early on Fridays to attend mosque became a problem in terms of teaching and learning because there was no cover up time of activities they missed”*. In this way, while they recognised diverse religious beliefs in schools, these principals protected and promoted learners’ right to education.

However, it is imperative to mention that incidences where learners and staff had to attend school assemblies and occasions such as opening and closing of gatherings where only Christian devotions, for instance, were observed, were evident. Principal Eight admitted, *“we would emphasise the point of assembly attendance”*. This approach was dependable on parents’ expression though. *“Unless there are cases where a parent would tell us that his child must be excused from the assembly, all learners had to attend,”* emphasised Principal Ten. Contrary to this open policy, this study discovered that at some of these principals’ schools, it became a problem for learners from the Islamic faith, for instance to practise their religions by means of the religious apparel. In Principal Five’s school for example, *“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". In trying to avoid the destructive conflict that could erupt due to mismanagement of multi-faith observances in schools, principals in this study promoted singular religious beliefs while they prohibited the others.

As they played their support role in the development of the religious observances policy, principals continued to meet with conflicts that called for their mediation attention. As Principal Nine, for instance, guided the SGB that they had to indicate in the policy that religious observances should be free and attendance to them should be voluntary, the SGB said, "*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*". In order to avoid destructive conflict, some principals would accept the policy as adopted by the SGB but implemented it in an amicable way. For instance, they would excuse educators from attending and/or conducting morning assembly. Principal Seven 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*". Similarly, Principal Eleven indicated, "*if an educator is not comfortable with the conducting of the assembly, s/he must report [it]. Although his/her name remains on the duty roster, one SMT member stands in for him/her*".

In order not to deviate from the adopted religion policy of the school and not to call for conflict between stakeholder groupings in schools, other principals implemented the policy as agreed. However, if they see that the preferred mode of dealing with religious observances has hiccups or brings conflicts, "*we bring the matter back in a forum. We reassess, we amend and then we continue. That is why the policies are not constant but, evolving depending on what is happening to the school illustrated the principal*", Principal Six articulated. Principal Twelve reiterated this approach,

We once gave the committee member from the Islamic faith 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.

It is apparent from these findings that while they were confronted with situations that required their best possible conflict mediating skills, principals in this study demonstrated their willingness and ability to mediate them in diverse ways ensuring that they do not compromise the smooth running of the schools. In the section that follows, I discuss the findings.

6. DISCUSSIONS

In discussing these findings, it is crucial to point out that depending on the context to which it is applied, mediation can take different pathways or strategies in addressing conflicts (Lee & Teh, 2009; Callister & Wall, 2004). As I discuss these findings, I map the different ways in which principals conceptualised and approached the implementation of the religion policies of their schools (as presented above) by paying particular attention to two capabilities of transformative mediation namely "empowerment" and "recognition" as suggested by Bush and Folger (1994). It is within these perimeters that I carried out the analysis of principals' narratives.

6.1 Empowerment: A transformative conflict mediation tool

According to Bush and Folger (1994, 2005) “empowerment” improves the capability of the conflicting parties by enabling them to handle and make better decisions on their conflict problems. That is, they are able to clarify their goals, options and preferences as well as to communicate and negotiate these with the opposing party. It transpired from the principals’ narratives that as the Department of Education introduced the religion policy, schools received copies without further guidance on how to implement it. *“The policies just come and there are no people to unpack them,”* Principal One said. With or without clear direction of religion policy implementation in schools, it became evident that conflict regularly occurred between the department as policy initiator, SGBs as policy developers at school level and principals as implementers of the policy.

Realising a need to strengthen capacity in this regard (Dhialulhaq *et al.*, 2017), it is important to mention that measures that some of the principals in this study used to attend to the conflicts are amicable and transforming. For instance, in another principal’s school, if they saw that the preferred mode of dealing with religious observances caused hiccups or conflicts, they would:

Bring the matter back in a forum. We reassess, 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 Six).

By enhancing communication and building consensus, the approach helped prevent unnecessary disruptions and tensions while generating more technically sound policy implementation plans that drew upon the variety of expertise and knowledge within the school community and beyond (Leach & Pelkey, 2001). In this way, the conflicting stakeholder groupings agreed on and put in place a procedure that could be used as a platform to address, maintain and prevent conflict in future. This approach, according to Mitchell (2002), is one of the important mechanisms needed to ensure that conflict transformation can be sustainable.

One other aspect of importance with the SGBs is that most parent governors (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). Besides their level of education, *“not all the parents understand what was meant by the new approach of the SGB because they were used to the old school committees which were not so democratically elected”*, emphasised Principal Three. When faced with the challenge of SGB members’ lack of the necessary skills to execute the mandate of the department, some principals became advisors and explored alternative options, when necessary, providing suggestions to the SGB, especially when the SGB could not propose any mediation strategy themselves (Dhialulhaq, Gritten & De Bruyn, 2014). In all this, they would do everything to ensure that the conduct of the SGB and the department was lawful, fair and reasonable (Joubert & Prinsloo, 2009). In fact, one of the principals took the initiative to find the right representation (i.e. members from diverse religious backgrounds) in the candidates coming through for SGB portfolios, regardless of religion. This is what Principal Four said, *“if I see that there is not really a good representation in the candidates coming through, I would phone a particular parent and say, ‘I know you can add value to the governing body of the school, don’t you want to make yourself available...?’”* In this way, members with a shortage of the necessary skills would benefit from those with them.

The principals' narratives indicate that the Life Orientation (LO) educators in their schools did not give religion education the attention it required. One reason for this was educators' lack of knowledge of religions other than Christianity as well as resources. *"In most cases, educators are knowledgeable about Christian matters but not that of other religions because most of them are Christians"*, Principal Seven explained. Principal Two echoed, *"Honestly, there are no materials to support the teachings except that you will have content in the textbook"*. In addition to a lack of resources in schools, Ferguson and Roux (2003) remind us that the majority of public schools officially based their religion education programmes on Bible Education (mono-religious Christianity) until 1997. This implies that the majority of educators and parent governors 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). This scenario is enough to perpetuate conflict amongst parent governors and educators as well as between these stakeholder groupings and the department.

Admitting that each religion is worth learning about, other principals became resource providers and secured support material or resources as well as creating staff development opportunities where their educators lacked skills and knowledge (Dhialulhaq, Gritten & De Bruyn, 2014). In addition to the prescribed supporting material for religion education by the department, *"we have also organised a publisher who provides us with additional support material (i.e. CDs, DVDs and textbooks) for the subject area"*, said Principal Five. Considering the religiously diverse composition of his school and the possibility that some of the religious leaders might be unavailable, Principal Eight recalled, *"on several occasions, I invited and allowed the invitation of different religious leaders to the school to give the insights of their religions to learners and staff"*. In so doing, these transformative conflict mediators had their eyes and ears open as they searched for opportunities to increase stakeholder groupings' clarity about or skills in areas of need (Bush & Folger, 1994).

6.2 Recognition: A transformative conflict mediation tool

As Bush and Folger (1994, 2005) put it, "recognition" as a transformative conflict mediation tool enables parties to see and understand the other person's point of view. Meaning, to understand how they define the problem and why they seek the solution that they do. According to Dhialulhaq, Gritten and De Bruyn (2014), it is crucial to understand conflict issues and the context when addressing the conflict. In their position as official members of the SGB and ex-officio members of the department, the principals in this study were aware of the religious changes that came about with the adoption of the country's 1996 constitution. Some of the changes they mentioned were that schools might not refuse the admission of learners and/or appointment of educators on religious grounds (RSA, 1996a, 1996b). Based on these changes, their religiously oriented schools (schools with a religious ethos) *"appointed educators and admitted learners despite their faith"*, expressed Principal Four. The narratives of these principals also indicate that their schools, despite their status of being of Christian character, allowed appointees and learners from other religions to excuse themselves from morning assemblies (Van der Walt, 2011). They would also *"allocate a classroom for learners to observe their religions"*, as Principal Nine indicated and *"permit Muslim learners to leave school early to attend mosque on Fridays at 12:00"*, extended Principal Twelve.

Principal Seven pointed out that in her school, when they appoint educators, they would tell them *"you are welcome to arrive at school five minutes later if they are uncomfortable with*

the way morning assemblies are dealt with". In the same vein, Principal Eleven indicated that, "if an educator is not comfortable with the conducting of the assembly, he/she must report [it]. Although his/her name remains on the duty roster, one SMT member stands in for him/her". It is important to point out that in fulfilling the role of transformative conflict mediators, principals acknowledged the diversity that existed among learners and staff in terms of religious and cultural backgrounds (Tam, 2010). As such, these principals charted a direction that convinced stakeholder groupings that it was time to change (Moloi, 2005).

It is important to note that principals in this study did not cite religion as a factor that had an influence on deciding who could play a role in the SGB. In fact, this study revealed that most of the SGBs had diverse religious representation in leadership portfolios (i.e. chairperson) (Naidoo, 2005). Based on these insights, I can argue that the schools led by most principals in this study demonstrated a commendable level of religious recognition. That is, they played the role of transformative conflict mediators and that made them agents of change (Bush & Folger, 1994). They appointed SGB members from diverse religious backgrounds to reflect the acknowledging nature of their schools. As Principal Five put it: "My previous chairperson of the governing body was a Hindu and his wife a Muslim. He was very happy with the way we dealt with religious matters at school".

Principals in this study did not only recognise learners and staff in their initiatives to transform conflicts in the process of religion policy implementation. Parents were also highly recognised. While learners' attendance of school assemblies and occasions such as opening and closing of meetings where only Christian devotions were observed was evident, this approach depended on parents' expressed wishes. "Unless there are cases where a parent would tell us that his child must be excused from the assembly, all learners had to attend", Principal Ten underlined. Furthermore, while allowing learners to leave school early to attend mosque on Fridays, all they needed was a "confirmation letter from the parent that the learner was 'a committed Muslim'", highlighted Principal Three. These principals did not only care for the safety of the learners, but they also recognised and accommodated Islamic faith (Sulaiman, 2016; Fatima, 2014). All-in-all principals in this study could be described to be "religiously sensitive" in that they did not only try to understand their own religious belief systems but also encouraged other stakeholder groupings to better understand and respect religious views and beliefs of others (Dhiaulhaq, Gritten & De Bruyn, 2014).

Based on the preceding discussions, I infer that most of the principals in this study understood and interpreted (a) the aim behind the religion policy; (b) their mediation role in the implementation process and, more importantly, (c) that as transformative conflict mediators in multi-faith schools, they are obligated to transform conflicts that erupt because of hotly contested policies. However, more often than not, their previous experiences – and not their theoretical knowledge of policy acquired through training – informed their decisions and practices.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

For the purpose of this study, the six important criteria used in the selection of participants resulted in certain limitations to the research. The first of these was that, in accordance with qualitative research principles, it was important to purposefully sample participants, principals in this case, who had experience of the religion in education policies prior to and after 1994. Selected principals were therefore typically more mature and middle-aged. The

second limitation was the fact that all of the participants were students from one South African university and thus predominantly from a specific region, the northern region of the country, which could limit the findings. Third, since more than 70% of people in South Africa belong to the Christian faith, it was expected that Christians would possibly also dominate the sample group. Last, but not least, my position as a student with insufficient time and resources could not allow me enough time in the field to really get to know participants.

8. CONCLUSION

Despite the practical challenges that school principals encountered in the implementation of the religion policy, they demonstrated confidence, openness and generosity in developing the identity of their schools as transformative conflict mediators. In striving to maintain this status, they displayed the reasonable amount of empowerment by making decisions and acting on them while they recognised the interests and opinions of stakeholder groupings from a religious “other”. I therefore have a strong belief that the capabilities of transformative conflict mediation at school level were made possible by the fact that the principals in this study were “insiders”. They understood the cause of the conflict since they lived and experienced it themselves and they were present to monitor the situation.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

I therefore recommend proper and adequate training for principals in order to assist the state’s attempt to facilitate the implementation of policies fraught with tension. These policies may pose moral dilemmas in schools regarding people’s understanding and expression of spirituality, diversity, morality and human nature. After all, policies are meant to bring harmony and good working relationships, rather than destructive conflict and division. A common understanding of policies is therefore of paramount importance. I further recommend that universities offer a course on mediation and transformative mediation in particular as a leadership strategy for conflict transformation in schools, as it holds a potential benefit for fields such as education.

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