Abstract
South Africa’s Policy for Religion and Education is linked to a broad range of initiatives celebrating linguistic, cultural and religious diversity. Public and independent schools are expected to implement the Policy and ensure that they act in a religiously neutral way. This article highlights how students in Catholic schools understand religion in school and the impact of religions, via results obtained from the REDCo II (Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries) Questionnaire on Religion and School. It was especially important to understand how students experience religious diversity within a new approach to religious education in South Africa. The research findings show that students are very positive towards religious diversity which could be understood within the dramatic socio-political changes of the country as a backdrop. This study also underscores the inclusive nature of Catholic religious education.

Keywords
Religious diversity, Catholic schools, South Africa

Introduction
The “REDCo: Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries” was a European comparative research project, on young people’s views of religion, religious diversity and possibilities for dialogue in education that was carried out from 2006 to 2009 in eight countries (England, Estonia, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Spain) and the project focused mainly on the 14–16 age group. The project’s main aim was to establish and compare the potentials and limitations of religion in the educational systems of selected European countries (Valk et al., 2009). In 2012 a quantitative follow-up study was established as REDCo II with a variety of European countries (including Sweden, Finland and Ukraine) and a global perspective (South Africa and Mexico) so as to learn from different contexts (see Bertram Troost et al., 2014 for a discussion on the theoretical underpinnings of the project). One of the important overall research questions of the REDCo project was ‘what role can religion in education play concerning the way pupils perceive religious diversity?’ (Friederici in Valk et al., 2009).

South Africa was included in the international project to understand the concept from a different context other than Europe. Even though the questionnaire and its conceptualization was a continuation from 2008 study, the generic nature of the questions was still found useful to provide descriptive data on the South African context. The questions addressed by the questionnaire were divided into four parts; how pupils saw religion in school, in their life and surroundings, the impact of religions for dialogue and conflict and biographic details (see Bertram Troost et al., 2014 for a discussion on the questionnaire design). It was decided that each country could choose, within the framework of the questionnaire used, specific topics/sub research questions which were most relevant in their own context. It must be said that for South Africa, the concept diversity does not accumulatively build on existing notions of “multiculturalism” or “co-existence” but rather on new ways of thinking about diversity (Zinn & Keet, 2010, p. 76). Ambivalence towards particular notions of diversity needs to be viewed against the political, socio-historical realities of South Africa’s recent past, a past that continues to impact strongly on present realities and orientations. Despite the remarkable political changes since the first democratic elections and subsequent attempts to improve national unity, there have been mixed and often marginal effects upon intergroup relations (Steyn & Foster, 2008, p.25). In addition, it may seem that one of the ways religious diversity is obscured is precisely by creating an image of South Africa as a “Christian country.” With the recent change in the national curriculum from confessional religious education to multi-faith religion education it is especially meaningful to understand how students experience religious diversity.
within a new approach of religion education in South Africa. The aim of the South African project was then to understand how students understood religion in school and the impact of religions so as to understand how learners perceive religious diversity. To answer this research question, the REDCo II questionnaire was used in the independent sector, namely religious schools. In order to understand the context from which the South African sample was taken, some brief explanation of the independent sector and religious education in South Africa is necessary.

The South African School Act recognizes two broad categories of schools, namely public and independent (DoE, 1996). Even though growth has expanded in the independent schools sector (Hofmeyr & Lee, 2004), it represents only 4% percent with a total student population of almost 500 000 students and must be seen in relation to the almost 12 million students (95%) in public education (DoBE, 2013). Whereas independent schools once catered for a majority of white students in high-fee traditional schools, now the majority of learners in the sector are black and its diversity and socio-economic spread has increased significantly (Hofmeyr & McCay, 2010). There is much emphasis in the sector on regulation to ensure quality education, equity and among other things, a commitment to follow the national curriculum guidelines (Motala & Dieltiens, 2008, p. 134). Using Kitaev’s (1999) classification there are five types of independent schools: community schools, profit-making schools, spontaneous schools, expatriate schools and religious schools. For this article the focus is on religious schools, and according to the Human Science Research Council over 46 percent of all independent schools can be classified as religious (Du Toit, 2004, p.13). There is however a wide range of different religious schools, encompassing Christian, especially of the fundamentalist variety, Jewish, Hindu and increasing numbers of Muslim schools. The Private Education and Development Project survey in 2001 (Dieltiens, 2003) found that 71% were Christian schools, 5% Muslim, 3% Jewish and 0, 5% were Hindu schools.

Catholic Schools in South Africa

The Catholic Church, through its mission in Catholic schools seeks to serve and participate as a meaningful partner in the ongoing development of South African society (CaSPA, 2010). Catholic schools have always focused their work largely in poorer, less developed parts of Southern Africa and offer quality education in spite of being under resourced. In total, there are 346 Catholic schools in South Africa; 250 are public schools on private property (due to cost considerations) and 95 are independent schools (CIE). In both types of schools, the school has a right to preserve its Catholic ethos and character, made possible by the Deeds of Agreement between the State and the Catholic Church (CaSPA, 2010).

In Catholic schools Religious Education (RE) “lies at the heart of the school curriculum which reflects the special character of the school and is part of the Church’s evangelizing mission” (Fostering Hope, 2006, p.2). Because of the religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution as a fundamental human right, Catholic schools with their particular religious identity, have a RE Policy (Fostering Hope, 2006) endorsed by the South African Catholic Bishops’ Conference and in line with government policy (Fostering Hope, 2006, p.2). The RE programme follows a multi-religious approach and “strives to be respectful and sensitive to the diversity of chosen and inherited religious paths of students” (CIE). It “actively endeavours to promote mutual understanding and respect among people of different religious and other world-views” (Fostering Hope, 2006, p. 6). Catholic schools provide a Christian view of how to be concerned, active and responsible citizens in the building of a new South Africa, and the building of a better world (CIE). Typically the RE programme in secondary schools follows the CORD curriculum (CIE) and both Catholics and non-Catholics attend the same RE classes about three classes per week, with attendance of Mass being compulsory. RE is also taught in the compulsory subject Life Orientation of the national curriculum, for all grades, that promotes the teaching of life skills.

Catholic schools were selected to be part of the sample because there has been much debate about whether religious schools in general support the goals of nation-building (Valley, 2005; Dreyer, 2006; Motala & Dieltiens, 2008, p. 123), as tensions arise from new religious identities which may potentially challenge a common citizenship. In divided societies like South Africa people identify more readily with one of its ethnic, racial or religious components than with the society as a whole (Mattes, 2002). In the new national Policy on Religion and Education (DoE, 2003), while the infusion with the respect for values, cultural and religious diversity is positive, it is however clear that there is no explicit monitoring and support provided to assess the extent of implementation (Zinn & Keet, 2010, p. 78). In spite of the fact that Catholic schools have a recognized RE Policy one has to question whether religious schools implement the focus of citizenship education and act in a religiously neutral way.

The South African Project

An online questionnaire supplied by REDCo II was targeted to school children aged between 14 and 16 (Grade 8 to Grade 10) to be administered in Catholic schools. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the University Ethics Committee, the Catholic Institute of Education (CIE) and because learners were below the legal age, consent was obtained from parents and guardians. Due to the nature of our developing educational context we could not administer the questionnaire online because of a lack of computer facilities in all schools hence a pen
and paper survey was completed. 795 questionnaires were sent to schools and 637 were eventually entered online (representing a 80% response rate) by the researcher onto the REDCo II database. A significant number of responses were discarded as they did not fall within the 14-16 target groups, were older students and still in school, which speaks to a contextual challenge. Analysis was carried out using SPSS to produce descriptive statistics and cross tabulations. Variables used focused on gender, location of school, type of school, and religious background. The main tendencies in the data were described through frequencies and percentages.

Sample

Given the limited resources available to the national REDCo II groups, the choice was made to constitute sample groups that have been carefully selected (Beraud, 2009, p.24), although they cannot be considered representative samples in the strict sense of the term. In addition the lack of information on the overall population of religious schools, as Motala and Dieltiens suggest, is that “South Africa mirrors the experiences of other developing countries in that it shares the common problem of consistent and reliable information to define the sector” (2008, p.133). For these reasons non-probability sampling methods were used with the focus on heterogeneity from both urban and rural schools contexts, from public and private education, both with and without religious affiliation. The sample (n = 637) was made up three schools, a large public rural school (co-ed) and two smaller (one all-girls and one all-boys) independent urban schools from Gauteng province. This sample represents 6% of the total population.

In the sample students were 269 (42%) male and 367 (58%) female; the average age of the respondents was 14.5 years. The three schools represent a 48% rural/public and 52% urban/independent split. The main language spoken at home was English (20%) or African languages (80%) from the four main language groups. 98% of respondents participated in compulsory non-confessional religious education in classes. The most influential sources of religious information were: family 74%, school 54%, books 50%, friends 20% and lastly the internet 15% and media 12%.

In terms of the role of religion, 87% of respondents state they have a religion comprised of: Evangelical 55% (made up of Christian denominations and African Independent Churches), Catholic 30% (which is in line with the 27% profile of Catholic schools) and other religions (12%), made up of African Religion and minority religions like Islam (1%) and Hinduism (1%).

Findings

Students had strong positive agreement towards their experiences of religion in school. In terms of the function of religious education there was very positive agreement for the suggestions that school could serve to ‘get an objective knowledge about different religions’ (85% agreed) and to ‘learn the importance of religion for dealing with problems in society’ (83% agreed). It would seem that there are opportunities to discuss religious issues from different perspectives with majority (80%) agreement; Catholics strongly agreeing by 40%, Evangelicals by 36% and other religions by 28%. It would seem that those from other religions and rural/public school have less opportunity to discuss religious issues from different perspectives. Also these groups were more likely to support the idea that learning about religions leads to conflicts in the classroom.

Students were positive about the way religion appeared in schools evident in religious food requirements, facilities for prayer and voluntary religious service as part of school life. However, with questions that dealt with making allowances for students’ religious needs only 13% of respondents strongly agreed with wearing visible symbols (like headscarves) although 37% had strongly agreed with discreet ones (e.g. small crosses). Interesting to note that students from other religions supported the idea that ‘students should be excused from taking some lessons for religious reasons’ more than others.

Even with the strong support for multi-religious education, there was at the same time support that at school students should ‘be guided towards religious belief’ with 77% agreement, maybe because students are studying in a religious school. Female students agreed strongly and as this study showed 65% of girls compared to 35% of boys stated that religion is very important. It seems there is a tension between studying in a religious school and its religious formation versus learning religion education in an objective way. This issue was evident again in the question, religion helps “to learn about my own religion” where 86% of respondents agreed, with rural/public schools strongly agreeing by 48% and urban/independent with a stronger Catholic ethos agreeing by 64%.

In questions about evaluating different models of religious education, students were opposed to the suggestion that ‘students should study religious education in separate groups according to which religion they belong to’ with 51% disagreement; Catholics strongly disagreed by 30% (as the disagreement is in line with the RE Policy), Evangelicals by 24% and other religions by 17%. To the question ‘religious education should be optional’ there was an overall 51% agreement, other religions strongly agreed by 30%, Evangelicals by 17% and Catholics by 15%. Those from other religions show highest support for optional religious education and wanting to study separately.

Findings on the impact of religion showed a strong agreement for tolerance "I respect other people who believe" produced 86% agreement, while another similar question "at school I have respect for everyone whatever their religion" shows an overwhelming 96% agreement. To
the question whether ‘religious people are less tolerant to others’, Catholics strongly disagreed by 31%, Evangelicals by 21% and other religions by 20%. To the question ‘I do not want to live together with people from other religions as I don’t like them’ students disagreed by (89%).

With questions about social or policy adjustments which could help promote co-operative living by people of different religions, nearly half of respondents (46%) considered it very important ‘if people share common interests’ while 56% of respondents thought it very important ‘if they know about each others’ religions.’ Students also showed preferences for mixing with others of different religions both in school and in their spare time, with respondents from other religions less likely to do so.

For questions about talking about religion, for example, ‘religion doesn’t interest me at all – we have more interesting things to talk about’ respondents strongly disagreed by 49%. The question ‘talking about religion helps me to live peacefully together with people from different religions’ showed a 79% agreement, with rural/public schools strongly agreeing by 62% maybe because of their communal orientation, whereas urban schools only strongly agreed by 32%. In an openly religious country respondents were positive about the function of talking about religion, with female students and rural schools being more likely to be in favour of this.

There was support for religious education and diversity in most of the qualitative responses (13% of sample) evidenced in statements like, “ever since I started to learn about other religions at school I am able to be friends with people of other religions” or “every single school must teach religion education because this will reduce the hate and fighting at communities and at school” or “I personally think that everyone is different and all have different views, we just have to respect these views.”

Discussion

The aim of the South African project was to understand how learners saw religion in school and the impact of religions so as to understand how students perceived religious diversity. Students on the whole were supportive of religious diversity from their views of religion in school and were open to dialogue on religious issues. The reason for the very positive response and within the international sample as well, is because South Africa, as it is often characterized, is a highly religious country since many South Africans consider their religious beliefs to be central to their lives. In addition the sample was conducted in Catholic schools that have a strong focus on interreligious dialogue and tolerance - results could have been different in another type of religious school. In spite of this, the overall finding is significant in a highly intolerant society where discriminatory structures and practices are sewn into the very fabric of society (Zinn 2010, p. 83).

In this sample students appreciated school as an institution that transfers knowledge about religions and were in favour of religious education which focuses on the societal and the communicative dimension of religion. There were opportunities to discuss religious issues from different perspectives however the experience was more for those in urban/independent schools with a stronger Catholic ethos and from Christian students. In spite of the fact that objectivity with regard to knowledge about religions is preferred, learners also felt that religious education should guide them towards religious beliefs which could be due to the fact that learners are attending a religious school. It seems there is a tension between studying in a Catholic school with the goal of religious formation versus learning religion education from a multi-faith perspective in line with the national Policy. The challenge for Catholic schools is to reconcile the tensions between compliance and identity and of remaining authentic within a multicultural and multi-faith context.

In this sample Christian students were found to be the majority (85%), and it could be viewed as a homogenous sample and the question that needs to be asked are – are Christian perspectives at the forefront? Is there enough space made for students to “choose their own inherited religious path?” From this study we find students almost resistance to religious diversity - students of other religions are most likely to view learning about religion as leading to conflict, prefer separate religious education classes or optional religious education and feel there are less opportunities to discuss religious issues from different perspectives. On the other hand, adherents of other religions (14%), mostly made up of African religions prefer that at school they be guided towards religious belief, are less likely to prefer mixing with others from other religions and are more likely to discuss religious opinions and convince others of their religious beliefs. Christie’s (1990) analysis about the assimilation culture in Catholic schools suggests that sooner or later significant cultural challenges and a new school culture will come about, because the presence of black learners will demand a new school culture. A significant majority of South Africans, even though Christian, subscribe to traditional beliefs and ancestral rituals where the African worldview is a religious worldview (Mbili ,1990, p.13) - everything in life has to do with religion. Actually a broader discussion needs to be had of the intellectual and cultural hegemony of the West and the growing discourse that demands the acknowledgement and inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems in education. In speaking about traditional African religions of South Africa, Amoah and Bennett (2008, p. 19) state that “non-discrimination is essential to ensure diversity, and until equal rights are fully mobilized, diversity will not be attained nor will traditional religions be revived to compete on their own terms in the free marketplace of faith.” The politicising of religious environments and traditions, and
the focus of a human rights perspective impact on teaching and learning of religion (Roux, 2007, p.481). Further research of a qualitative nature (Chidester & Settler, 2010, p.215) is needed to understand how traditionalism deals with the secular concept of religious diversity. It must be noted that the extent of traditionalism could have been more pronounced, if the categories of choice of religion on the questionnaire were clearer.

The majority of students relate to religion in a positive way and since religion is very important to a larger majority of respondents, it determines the whole of life, so there is respect for other people who ‘believe’ and religion is not regarded as nonsense. At the same time their ideas of religion are open to change. Hofmeyr and Lee (2004, p.171) suggest while parents may want affirmation of their African culture, students appear to be mainly interested in accessing the global, consumer culture. Their views relate not only to personal belief but to the school and wider community. There was significant agreement between the personal importance of religion and most of the items regarding tolerance and dialogue of religion. This appears to be the most decisive factor for the way the students view religious diversity with students tending to be generally more positive, the more important religion is to them, with respect to the impact of learning and talking about religion for themselves as well as for understanding others and living together in peace. This significant support for religious diversity could be understood within the dramatic socio-political changes of the country as a backdrop, the establishment of a secular state, the stress on religious freedom, tolerance and a democratic ethos from political and religious leaders and the call to transcend cultural and religious differences in building a united nation. In addition, despite the clear demarcation between state and religion in South Africa, faith-based organizations have at their disposal a political theology that supports human rights, democracy and development. They have unique normative resources to justify supporting active forms of citizenship (Piper, 2009, p. 72). At the same time, the support for diversity could also been seen a general youth phenomenon (Ziebertz, 1993, p. 97).

Gender appears to be a distinctive factor in the importance of religion; significantly more females compare to males stated that religion was very important. Girls more than boys tend to be in favour of religion as a school subject, they want to know more about and from other religions, and are more positive about the possibilities to live together with people of different religions in society, this was found in other REDCo samples as well (ter Avest, Jozsa & Knauth, 2010, p. 302). In this sample more female students agreed that religion leads to conflict than males. When it came to questions of proselytize a different religion, gender differences show males were more likely to ignore the peer, however females are more likely to discuss opinions, convince peers and explain their own opinions as best. The strong opinion by females towards religion may be because mothers are more active in the religious socialization process. This study also revealed that 37% of learners did not know whether or not their father had a belief system reflecting that in many cases, fathers were absent. The normative gender role expectation of African society is strong. There needs to be an interrogation of how religious discourses supports patriarchy and shapes gender differences and an understanding of how particular historical and intellectual forces within cultures have shaped gender frameworks (Bhola, 2002).

What was evident in this study was the inclusive nature of Catholic education. Within the sample it was found that Catholic learners were most in favour of cooperative religious education models, mixing with others from different religions, least likely to convince another about religious beliefs and most likely to state that respecting the religion of others helps to cope with differences. Catholic schools have a history of actively striving for tolerance and respect for cultural and religious differences, and were racially integrated even during the heyday of apartheid (Christie, 1990). It would seem that the religious socialization in schools in its focus on diversity has a lasting impact on all students. Students are willing to explore religious matters despite their religious upbringing and socialization. It also suggests that religious education does provide a way for students, especially those coming from a relatively homogenous religious background, to learn about and from a diversity of religions.

Conclusion

This descriptive study found that students are positive towards religion in school and religious diversity broadly. However it must be noted that attitudes of religious diversity and actions are not simple and linear. The relationship between the cognitive, affective and behavioural components are much more complex than once assumed (Van der Ven, 1993, pp.136-137). According to Van der Ven behaviour seems to be determined by factors other than mere cognitions and affects, such as intentions, priorities and the contextuality of time and place (Van der Ven, 1993, p.136-137). Nevertheless this limited study does show that, from the attitudes of students, that differences can be overcome by education that cultivates informed respect for people of other religions in a democratic society. The findings also underscore the inclusive nature of Catholic education where teaching about other religions does not threaten the identity of the Catholic schools.

Notes on Contributor

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