



# Religious Education as a Pedagogy of Care in the Context of Violence: Re-Imaging Working and Thinking Together

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative paper couched with the decoloniality theory addresses the question of how religious education as a pedagogy of care can mitigate the ambivalent terrain of school violence. Despite various inventions within South African schools, the classroom remains violent and unsafe for both learners and educators igniting the adoption of religious education as a pedagogy of care. The author used the decoloniality theory since it calls for rehumanisation of people affected by school violence. The findings indicate that despite challenges associated with religious education, the subject can be conceptualised as a pedagogy of care to mitigate the challenges of school violence. The argument of the paper is that education authorities need to re-imagine religion as a pedagogy of care that has the impetus to evoke working and thinking together within the mainstream curriculum practices in South Africa. The paper contributes to knowledge in the sense that it locates arguments in decoloniality calling for equal representation of knowledge in the curriculum to address school violence. It sees religious education as the key to contributing to a peaceful existence in school and society.

**Keywords:** *Living and Working together, religion education, school violence, best practices.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Religion has co-existed with mankind. There has always been a human instinct for people to appeal to various deities for survival, guidance and solutions to human trajectories. Thus, any attempt to separate humanity from religion is futile and can only result in an unending crisis. While South Africa has freedom of religion enshrined in the constitution, there have been attempts to wean religion from the schooling system. This implies that religion should be practiced at home and religious shrines only not within the four walls of the classroom. As a way to avoid religious education in schools by design or default, “South African educational authorities have introduced many policies and safety programmes to quell the climate of school violence however no meaningful change has been achieved.<sup>1</sup> School

<sup>1</sup> Nuraan Davids and Yusef Waghid, “Responding to Violence in Post-Apartheid Schools: On School Leadership as Mutual Engagement,” *Education as Change* 20, no. 1 (2016): 28–42, 29.

violence is one social pathology haunting South African teaching and learning space in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> School violence has culminated in the deaths or serious injuries of learners and educators and this is well documented in various media houses. The problem speaks to a greater degree of unhealthy school relationships among stakeholders.<sup>3</sup> The situation is exacerbated by the increase in the presence of weapons within classroom corridors.<sup>4</sup> Thus, any conflict, which is not well managed, results in fatality and renders schools unsafe sites for the co-existence of different people.

In South Africa, there have been different programs developed to mitigate school violence, but the battle is far from over. The programs deliberately do not refer to religion and unfortunately, the proposed alternatives to school violence seem not to be working. Suggesting another alternative in the form of religion seems fruitless since it is thwarted within the public school curriculum. Furthermore, religion is seen from some quarters as a useless subject that is incompatible with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century cooperate world. In fact, there is an unspoken assumption captured by Lunn who sees it “as an impediment to economic advancement, and irrelevant for modern societies.”<sup>5</sup> Such an assumption is not validated by research and also shows a minimalistic understanding of the value of religion in citizenship education and responsibility. In fact, many prosperous countries in the world have maintained religion in many facets of life including the curriculum. It is ironic that religion is practiced freely in society but poses a problem when it is practiced in schools despite a call and suggestion of the need for religious pluralism. South Africa as a rainbow nation is facing various trajectories as a postcolonial state that seeks to address the past trajectories of apartheid. Cognisant of the foregoing, the study seeks to argue for the re-engagement of religious education in the mainstream curriculum to contribute to various efforts to address school violence.

This article does not come in a vacuum. Many scholars have contributed various strategies to address or mitigate school violence in South Africa. The arguments of scholars can be categorised into different groups. Some scholars converge in arguing that the use of corporal punishment is a form of violence and teachers should desist from using it.<sup>6</sup> They seem to suggest that teachers contribute to school violence through the use of corporal punishment. They further argue that although corporal punishment has been outlawed in South Africa, some teachers still revert to it to discipline learners. However, while there is a degree of correctness, these scholars fail to account for violence in schools where corporal punishment is not administered. In fact, school violence does not only occur when teachers use corporal punishment. Other scholars see school violence as a by-product of the presence of weapons and social pressure which either learners or teachers have difficulties to put to an end to school violence.<sup>7</sup> Such scholars call for the removal of weapons in schools.<sup>8</sup> However, the challenge with these scholars is that they limit school violence to physical harm and ignore other forms of violence such as verbal and sexual which when not addressed ultimately manifest as physical violence.

<sup>2</sup> Sandy Lazarus et al., “Towards Safer Schools,” *Crime, Violence and Injury in South Africa: Enabling Child Safety*, 2012, 134–47; Meong Jin Shin and Tracy Diane Cassidy, “Designing a Fashion Driving Forces Website as an Educational Resource,” *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education* 8, no. 2 (2015): 173–83..

<sup>3</sup> Guadalupe Francia and Silvia Edling, “Children’s Rights and Violence: A Case Analysis at a Swedish Boarding School,” *Childhood* 24, no. 1 (2017): 51–67; Regina Day Langhout and Lori Annear, “Safe and Unsafe School Spaces: Comparing Elementary School Student Perceptions to Common Ecological Interventions and Operationalizations,” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2011): 71–86.

<sup>4</sup> M. Abramovay and M. Gracas Rua, *Violences in Schools* (Brasilia, Brazil: UNESCO, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Jenny Lunn, “The Role of Religion, Spirituality and Faith in Development: A Critical Theory Approach,” *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 5 (July 2009): 937–51, 939. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590902959180>.

<sup>6</sup> Sekitla Daniel Makhasane and Vitallis Chikoko, “Corporal Punishment Contestations, Paradoxes and Implications for School Leadership: A Case Study of Two South African High Schools,” *South African Journal of Education* 36, no. 4 (2016): 1–8; Elizabeth T Gershoff, “School Corporal Punishment in Global Perspective: Prevalence, Outcomes, and Efforts at Intervention,” *Psychology, Health & Medicine* 22, no.sup1(2017): 224–39.

<sup>7</sup> Abramovay and Gracas Rua, *Violences in Schools*; P Burton and L Leoschut, *School Violence in South Africa: Results of the 2012 National School Violence Study Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention• Monograph Series, No 12•* (Cape Town• March, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Burton and Leoschut, *School Violence in South Africa: Results of the 2012 National School Violence Study Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention• Monograph Series, No 12•*.

There is also a group of scholars such as Mncube and Harber who attribute school violence to a lack of teacher professionalism.<sup>9</sup> They indicate that teachers fail to provide feedback to learners on time, engage in sexual relations with learners and are sometimes absent from school which agitates learners to protest the lack of teacher professionalism.

While this researcher appreciates efforts from various scholars to address school violence in South Africa, this article is unique in the following ways; Firstly, very few studies evoke the need for people to rethink religious education as an ideal subject to mitigate school violence in schools. In this, it argues that religion provides or evokes morality which is a missing social ingredient in South Africa. The researcher believes that morality coming from various religious texts can move South Africa toward a direction of peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, the paper is unique in that it argues that living and working together is possible when schools revert to religion to frame relationships. Finally, the paper is unique in that it is couched in decoloniality, a theory that warns people not to normalise violence since it can be sustained by lies, deceit and hypocrisy.<sup>10</sup> It is within this ambivalence, that religious education can be explored to mitigate the challenge of school violence through its emphasis on virtues such as tolerance, morality and living and thinking together within decoloniality thinking.

### **Theoretical Framework: Decoloniality Theory**

The study is premised on the decoloniality theory which has roots in Latin America.<sup>11</sup> Highlighting decoloniality further, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that “it is born out of a realisation that ours is an asymmetrical world order that is sustained not only by colonial matrices of power but also by pedagogies and epistemologies of equilibrium that continue to produce alienated Africans.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, “decoloniality is not fiction, but is legitimate, in the sense that it authorizes the lived experiences of those who are at the receiving end of subjection, and commands such subjects to declare their locus of enunciation.”<sup>13</sup> As a theory, decoloniality addresses the coloniality of knowledge, power, and being that have remained to haunt African societies many years after political independence. It is these three forms of coloniality that should be exposed and challenged. In essence, decoloniality is not just a political tool for resistance, but also a social movement that creates space for black people to redefine their identities and reaffirm their humanness as black and African in their very social locations.<sup>14</sup> This can be done through genuine dialogue.<sup>15</sup> This theory has been chosen to argue religious education as a pedagogy of care located in Ndlovu-Gatsheni's argument that;

What African [schools] must be vigilant against is the trap of ending up normalising and universalising [school violence] as a natural state of the world, however, it must be unmasked, resisted and destroyed because it produces a world order that can only be sustained through a combination of violence, deceit, hypocrisy and lies.<sup>16</sup>

With the decoloniality theory couching the study, the researcher is convinced that religious education as a pedagogy of care has the impetus to “evoke a philosophy of liberation, which entails

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<sup>9</sup> Clive Harber and Vusi Mncube, *Violence in Schools: South Africa in an International Context* (Unisa Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> S J Gatsheni-Ndlovu, “Why Decoloniality in the 21 St Century,” *The Thinker, for Thoughtful Leaders* 48 (2013), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Sergio Wanderley and Amon Barros, “Decoloniality, Geopolitics of Knowledge and Historic Turn: Towards a Latin American Agenda,” *Management & Organizational History* 14, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 79–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449359.2018.1431551>.

<sup>12</sup> Gatsheni-Ndlovu, “Why Decoloniality in the 21 St Century,” 11.

<sup>13</sup> T. Sithole, T. 2014. “Achille Mbembe: Subject, Subjection, and Subjectivity.” PhD thesis, University of South Africa (2014), 44. [http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/14323/thesis\\_sithole\\_t.pdf?sequence=1](http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/14323/thesis_sithole_t.pdf?sequence=1).

<sup>14</sup> George J. Sefa Dei, “‘Black Like Me’: Reframing Blackness for Decolonial Politics,” *Educational Studies* 54, no. 2 (March 4, 2018): 117–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2018.1427586>; Thinandavha D. Mashau, “Unshackling the Chains of Coloniality: Reimagining Decoloniality, Africanisation and Reformation for a Non-Racial South Africa,” *HTS Theologese Studies / Theological Studies* 74, no. 3 (May 29, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.4920>.

<sup>15</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 240–70.

<sup>16</sup> Gatsheni-Ndlovu, “Why Decoloniality in the 21 St Century,” 10.

the rehumanisation of the dehumanised and the courage to care and to love.”<sup>17</sup> Locating this paper in decoloniality is essential since it advocates for multi-representation of ideas and discourses towards creating a pluriversity world where all religions and pieces of knowledge about the deities are given equal representation as a way to reimagine a better world beyond Eurocentric modernity. The pluriversity aspects of decoloniality positioned the paper to argue for religion as one of the solutions to school violence and that South African educational authorities should not close doors for other alternatives. The article in the following section, focuses on the methodology of the study.

## METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative research premised on the transformative case study. The transformative paradigm is relevant for this paper due to its impetus to call for a change in the status quo, which is violent schools. The paradigm allows various stakeholders to work together with the intention to find alternatives that can mitigate school violence. In implementing the transformative paradigm, the qualitative approach was adopted to provide an in-depth, intricate and detailed understanding of meanings, actions, non-observable as well as observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions and behaviours. In selecting the participants, strategic random sampling and snowballing approaches were used to identify participants who are knowledgeable about the dynamics of school violence and the role of religion in peacebuilding. The participants’ knowledge assisted in suggesting curriculum modification that appreciates dynamics among people. The researcher interviewed 8 participants which included 2 principals, 3 teachers and 3 learners. To collect data, interviews were conducted for two weeks and 30 minutes were spent with each participant. The discussion was premised on two questions; what value does religion offer in the context of violence and how can religion be integrated into the school curriculum? The study adhered to ethical considerations. Permission was sought and granted by the institutional ethics committee and the Department of Education. Other ethical issues adhered to are the concepts of informed consent, the right to withdraw and the protection of participant identities.<sup>18</sup>

### *Data Analysis*

Data was coded according to the interview questions and categorised into major themes emanating from the data, thereby forming the central findings. Thus, thematic analysis was used analyse data. The researcher followed the Laws, Harper and Marcus model of thematic analysis. It has the following steps;

- Step 1: Reading and rereading all the collected data: The data from the interviews and focus group discussion were read and reread, to get the essence of school violence and curriculum in nexus with religion
- Step 2: Drawing up a preliminary list of themes arising from the data: Major issues and themes were identified and arranged according to the research question of the study.
- Step 3: Rereading the data: By rereading the data, the researcher checked if the themes that had been identified corresponded with what the participants said and with the research questions.
- Step 4: Linking the themes to quotations and notes: The themes emerging from the data were linked to various scholarly views.
- Step 5: Perusing the categories of themes to interpret them: During the interpretation of the data the research question was the key focus.

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<sup>17</sup> William Mporu, “Decoloniality as Travelling Theory: Or What Decoloniality Is Not,” in *Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research Seminar*, vol. 7,(2017), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Robert K Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods (Applied Social Research Methods)* (Sage publications Thousand Oaks, CA, 2014).

Step 6: Designing a tool to help discern patterns in the data: Through this, the patterns were determined during data analysis.

Step 7: Interpreting the data and deriving meaning: themes were identified which then became the subheadings.

To validate data, the researcher used the member-checking concept. In this, data was coded, analysed and the themes were sent to the participants to ensure that the data reflected the findings gathered during the interviews and more so responding to the research questions.<sup>19</sup> The following section presents the findings and discussions emanating from the research questions.

### **Value of Religion in the Violent Context**

In this section, the participants responded to question 1; what value can religion in the curriculum offer in mitigating school violence? The first point, which is discussed is the co-existence of religions.

#### ***Co-existence as a by-product of religious traditions***

It cannot be disputed that religion from time immemorial has been used as a tool for both violence and peace. Research has indicated that 21<sup>st</sup>-century believers have generally moderated their religious beliefs, and education has been able to harness various traditions into the curriculum which should serve as starting point that teachers should use to address school violence in the context of conflicting parties. A religious education teacher 1 noted that.

*Religious education is a very flexible subject which can be used by educators to address school violence. An educator can begin with conflict in religious traditions and zero into school violence with an emphasis on how the conflict was resolved.*

In addition to this, the principal one noted;

*Since I was young, there has always been a great respect for religion as a source for conflict resolution. Elders will tell us to go to church as a way to moderate our behaviour. In many cases, such suggestions did work, and people were able to change behaviour when they visited religious centres. Perhaps we need to humble ourselves as educators to consider religion to moderate people's behaviours and this may perhaps work in our schools.*

There is an indication that religious educators have a role to play in addressing school violence, which is to use various content materials to zero into addressing school violence. Such an approach would position religious education as a part of the solution to address school violence. From decoloniality thinking, all forms of knowledge are important and as such religious education as a form of knowledge when revisited into the curriculum, can assist learners and educators to move towards co-existence, a critical element to address school violence.

The following section discusses the second point raised by the participants which is, “religious education has the impetus to cultivate tolerance among people.”

#### ***Cultivating Tolerance among People***

One of the underlying challenges of school violence is that there is a high degree of lack of tolerance among educational stakeholders which results in unending school conflict. Through the engagement with the participants, it emerged that religion has the impetus to evoke non-threatening strategies to mitigate school violence. In doing so, teaching and learning should culminate in inducing tolerance in schools. In light of the foregoing, principal 2 noted;

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<sup>19</sup> Linda Birt et al., “Member Checking,” *Qualitative Health Research* 26, no. 13 (November 10, 2016): 1802, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870>.



*We look at educators and learners to initiate discussions which culminate into tolerance. Religious traditions are full of narratives which can be used to cultivate tolerance.*

Teacher 2 shared the same sentiments by noting the following,

*In school violence cases which I have attended, one of the things which stand out is that either the teacher or the learner was not tolerant of one's dressing, speech, or attitude. Usually, it's small things that spark conflict and one can tell that if a degree of tolerance was available among the conflicting partners, the conflict could have been avoided. We need therefore a curriculum which can teach tolerance and I really do not see any other subject which can do it like religion. We need to swallow our pride and return to the religious curriculum.*

The sentiments of the principal concur with the observation by Almirzanah, "learners must see through the spectacles of other cultures and develop an empathetic understanding of another culture.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, learners become ready to empathise with other cultures." The ability to do the foregoing enacts tolerant citizens, appreciate and embrace difference as part of humanity. The research also indicated that religious education is a subject which can provide tolerance to enable educators and learners to work and think together to address school violence. This author agrees with Preis and Russell, that within various "religious traditions exists an underlying thread of unity connecting the great religious traditions."<sup>21</sup> They each propound basic spiritual tenets and standards of behaviour that constitute the essence of social cohesion for peaceful co-existence. Cognisant of the foregoing, religious education with different traditions is positioned to evoke living, thinking and working together in creating free violent schools. The next point discussed is that, religion provokes questions about human life.

### ***Religion provokes questions about human life***

School violence or violence, in general, shows that there is a lack of a great deal in understanding the value of human life by perpetrators of it. It also speaks of the failure to understand the divine connection between human beings and the deities thus some of the incident of school violence results in the death of people. The research found that there is a need for a curriculum that helps educational stakeholders to embrace human life and find strategies for preserving it even within the milieu of conflict. In shedding more light on this, student 1 noted;

*We are growing in places where the killing of people is not scary. Every day we wake up to the news of the loss of lives which could have been avoided in all possible means. We are scared that even in schools we are not safe as well. I think we need studies which can make us understand the value of life and I see religion as ideal.*

In addition, teacher 3 noted that;

*Life is precious and unfortunately, we live in a country where it is taken easily and perpetrators are not put into accountability. This passes a silent message to learners that if you disagree with people, killing is one of the options since the justice system is failing us. I have no doubt that when our learners and teachers embrace religious discourses, we can see a change where life is valued and appreciated.*

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<sup>20</sup> Syafaatun Almirzanah, "Celebrating Differences through Dialogue in Indonesia," *Religious Education* 109, no. 3 (2014): 239.

<sup>21</sup> A. B Preis and F. Russell, "Dialogue among Civilizations: Regional Summit on Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Dialogue," *Tirana, Albania: Unesco*, 2006, 5.

There is a clear understanding among the participants that religion can awaken people's consciousness to reflect deeply about the meaning of life consequently igniting the need to preserve it at all costs. However, some learners and teachers lack a deep understanding of the value of human life and the need to preserve it. Arguing like this, the researcher is aware that there are some religious discourses which are violent by nature and such elements should be thwarted in every possible way since they do not represent the envisaged world where people live and work together devoid of violence, oppression and dehumanisation. It is critical then that at the centre of curriculum discourses, the value of life is cultivated through all possible means including religious education.

The following section responds to question 2 framing the study which is on the reintegration of religion into the South African curriculum.

### **The Re-Integration of Religion into the Mainstream Curriculum**

Religious education was officially removed in the South African public school in 2008. From there, some religious elements were scantily infused into the life orientation subject which was assumed will do better than religious education because it looked into different facets of life. However, life orientation did not live up to expectations and there are some sections of society calling for its removal since it is deemed a worthless subject. The implication of this is that few religious elements that remained in the curriculum are under a threat and with this same trajectory, one would assume that in years to come schools would be a no-go area for anything that appears religious. If such a route is taken, then it implies that the curriculum in South Africa would be incapacitated to address issues relating to citizenship education and the consequences would be more dire resulting in an immoral society which does not respect the rights of other people. The foregoing negates the plurality of knowledge in shaping citizenship education in South Africa and within the decoloniality argument, there is a danger when other forms of knowledge such as religious education are pushed to the periphery of citizenship education. The article argues that pushing religious education out of the schooling system presents threats to school safety.

The researcher is aware that an attempt of reintroducing religion education in schools seems impossible and far-fetched given the negativity associated with the subject in the South African curriculum. It appears that policy and educational planners are not prepared to reconsider religion but that does not forbid decolonial thinkers to continue to tease a need to rethink knowledge hierarchies which turn to relegate religious education to the periphery. Hence, the article agrees with Gade that, "our voices may have started as a low murmur from the margin, but it [can] become a distinct and unified cacophony of resistance."<sup>22</sup> In short, there was a consensus among the participants that religion is needed in schools to mitigate school violence. The critical question is how religious education can be integrated given a milieu where the subject is questioned and seen as not relevant in the democratic 21<sup>st</sup> century. Two suggestions emerged and are discussed below.

#### **a. Learning from best practice**

Organisations and countries have survived by learning from one another to improve practice. This is an appreciation that a country or an organisation cannot be self-sufficient. In fact, ideas for survival can be obtained from alternative systems and people. South Africa is not an island, it needs to tap into best practices on how other countries have addressed the problem of school violence. In this point, the participants noted Zimbabwe, Zambia and Botswana as good examples of countries which have maintained religious education in schools. While these countries have their own challenges, one thing which is not predominant is school violence. The critical question is how do they manage to mitigate school violence and what South Africa can learn from this? Though there hasn't been empirical

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<sup>22</sup> Christian B.N. Gade, "What Is *Ubuntu*,? Different Interpretations among South Africans of African Descent," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31, no. 3 (January 25, 2012): 484–503,493. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2012.10751789>.

research in these three countries on the correlation between religious education and limited school violence, this paper argues that it is because of religious education that there are low levels of school violence. Having taught religion in one of the countries mentioned, the researcher is convinced that religious content selected from plurality or multi-religious perspective was geared to create good citizenship where violence is shunned, and living and working together is promoted. Thus, South Africa must tap into best practices from countries which do not have problems with school violence.

### ***b. Deep reflection on the violent society***

The reintegration of religious education in South Africa requires a sense of humility and deep thinking about the future of South Africa in terms of school violence allowing a “shift the geography of reason” from violence to peaceful co-existence.<sup>23</sup> Failure to bring all possible bits of knowledge such as religious education will worsen the situation. Once the situation is worsened, no one will be safe from school violence and serious engagement on this social pathology cannot be delayed further. The Department of Basic Education should engage religious leaders and schools to draft a multiplicity of religious curricula which is geared toward mitigating emotions and anger which result in school violence. The researcher is sure the door remains open for religious scholars, curriculum planners, and religious leaders to rethink their stance on religion towards rescuing societies from violent individuals and the curriculum has a role to play and that role can be located within religious education.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has reignited the argument that religious education is an indispensable curriculum in the context of school violence. It noted that school violence remains a serious social pathology in South African schools and various attempts to address it seem not to be yielding meaningful results. Hence, in decoloniality thinking, there is a need to think in other terms and bring other forms of knowledge such as religion to come on board to complement other forms of knowledge with the intention of creating a school environment that allows people to live and work together. The paper ends by suggesting how religious education can be integrated into the mainstream curriculum. It is critical that South Africa adopts best practices from other countries which have managed to address school violence.

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<sup>23</sup> Nikolay Karkov and Jeffrey W Robbins, “Decoloniality and Crisis,” *JCRT* (2013).



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