

LEADERSHIP IN/OF TOLERANCE EDUCATION: CHALLENGES FACING HIZMET SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore opportunities and challenges facing Hizmet School principals in South Africa. The importance of teaching, learning and promoting tolerance as a value in South African schools, play a significant role in the post-apartheid education system, with the aim of delivering a more effective citizenry, contributing positively to social cohesion.

Schools established by the Hizmet Movement (Hizmet means "Service in Turkish), inspired by the teachings of Fethullah Gülen – a Turkish Islamic scholar and educational activist – are internationally acclaimed for its propagation of tolerance, peace, dialogue and social cohesion. These schools are renowned as the bastions of promoting tolerance in many parts of the world; South Africa included.

School leadership has a direct impact on tolerance education; by providing the necessary vision, leading by example and through active participation. The leadership role of Hizmet School principal is no different. It would be worth examining the opportunities and challenges, which are encountered by these principals, during the promotion of tolerance. The findings could guide school leaders who want to establish a tolerant schooling environment and broader community.

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative research method was employed at a number of Hizmet Movement affiliated schools in South Africa, known as Star Colleges, located in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. During this qualitative inquiry, focused group interviews and in-depth individual interviews are used as the primary generator of data. Three identified groups of stakeholders - principals, teachers and graduates – were involved during the interviews to elicit their experiences and observations about the opportunities and challenges facing principals in promoting tolerance. The data obtained in the research is analysed under certain codes and themes through content analyses.

The biggest challenge experienced by the participants was the frequent changing of principals. It takes time for principals to understand the culture of a school, and to develop a strategy for promoting tolerance in way that can be accepted and implemented by teachers and students. School principals have a crucial role in this process, and have to take advantages of opportunities and tackle the challenges in promoting tolerance. Ultimately, it should be a shared responsibility of all stakeholders to contribute meaningfully towards.

Key Words: tolerance, values, peace, education, leadership,

1 INTRODUCTION

There Post- apartheid South Africa has witnessed many preeminent challenges [1]. The most noticeable one is the impact of democracy in the life of ordinary people. Majority of citizens are for the first time in their lives experiencing freedom of association and choice. South Africa in general, has witnessed positive changes in society, but many challenges can be observed in the post-liberation landscape. Cultural, ethnic and racial diversity has for a long time been a matter of lived reality in new South Africa and its educational system. One of the most preeminent challenges revolves around the question of teaching and learning the culture of living together and tolerance, in a diverse community like South Africa.

The notion of "tolerance" is based on the idea that modern society has become increasingly globalised, and has begun functioning as a key point of reference and departure, during discussions and engagements around issues cultural and religious coexistence. Based on the historical context of

the notion of tolerance, it is well documented that tolerance may either signify a minimalistic form of political toleration or religious difference, or expand into a more comprehensive idea which challenges the preconceived cultural stereotypes, which are prevalent in society, and furthermore challenging the existing personal attitudes and prejudice towards others [2].

The discourse about tolerance and its limits are not new. The notion of tolerance is defined in various contexts: political, social, moral, educational, etc. One can argue that schooling is the bedrock of creating a society aware about the principles of tolerance. This statement places teachers, schools and principals at the very foundation of building a tolerant society, through education.

While attempting to build a culture of tolerance, one must try to seek reconciliation with the past and develop a contemporary approach to universal values, which includes empathy and critical reason, as an approach. Negative events occurring in the past, when multicultural societies were homogenised by force, should not be allowed to influence the future. The changing of circumstances in the world today, obliges us to accept that plurality and multicultural societies are inescapable realities.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) Declaration of Principles on Tolerance [3] outlines that: "Education is the most effective means of preventing intolerance. The first step in tolerance education is to teach people what their shared rights and freedoms are, so that they may be respected, and to promote the will to protect those of others."

Tolerance education has over the years, become increasingly concentrated in the process of formal education, however, it is also noticeable in the public domain, where tolerance education is part of a broader range of informal educational initiatives. Among these include: religious, humanitarian, and other community based organisations, civil society and action groups, which are involved in addressing these issues as an integral part of their work. Both in formal and informal education, teaching tolerance is associated with concepts such as citizenship education, peace education, human rights education, intercultural dialogue and interreligious learning. Further research has to be done to study their possible contribution to civic tolerance. It is necessary to investigate which of these concepts are related to tolerance, in order to underline the different pedagogical approaches, to determine under which conditions and presuppositions, they are the most successful, and functional in practice [4].

The role of education is a key variable in determining the level of tolerance that an individual, family, community, or nation can express. In diverse societies, tolerance becomes more of a norm, rather than an exception, especially if children from a young age are taught the value of tolerance through education, which somehow fosters tolerance [5].

As highlighted in The National Youth Policy [6] compiled by The Presidency, and the Manifesto On Values, Education and Democracy [7] produced by the Department of Higher Education and Training, the concepts of promoting tolerance amongst youth within an educational context is an important part of value-based education. Hence, in post-Apartheid South African schools, teaching tolerance plays a significant role in, because the ultimate aim is not only to focus on academic knowledge and excellence, but also to focus on social skills which empower learners to be more effective citizens. The paramount challenge is to translate lofty ideals of tolerance, respect and recognition into transformative practice – politically, pedagogically and in terms of personal formation [2].

Tolerance is not only understood within apolitical or legal framework of understanding and requirement, but also as an educational one. It would be too simplistic to expect education to only transmit knowledge about tolerance to subsequent generations. Learning is rather seen as a complex process of meaning, developing through interaction, by bringing together old and new forms of knowledge, experiences, action and interaction, between teachers and learners. Within this context, the class room and schools in general, are seen as a venue for fostering the values necessary for empowering generations with universal values and nurturing democratic citizens in plural and multicultural societies. Even though research in this particular field is limited, it does indicate that in general education increases tolerance [4].

Investigating new approaches to tolerance education is crucial for diverse societies and community like South Africa, which promotes tolerance and reconciliation. This has been a concept, continuously being promoted by the Hizmet School system since its establishment in 1999, and has been the broader philosophical idea of the Hizmet Movement since its founding [8], [9].

The schools established by the Hizmet Movement (Hizmet means "Service" in Turkish), inspired by the teachings of Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish Islamic scholar, philosopher and educational activist; are internationally renowned for their message of tolerance, peace, dialogue and social cohesion [10], and could be worth examining for this purpose.

The Hizmet Movement is a transnational civic society movement [11] with adherents around the world, collectively attempting to contribute to its founding values of peace, tolerance and mutual understanding, via the establishment of schools to promote education [12]. According to Celik [13], the Hizmet Movement is distinguished by its ability to establish schools in areas where ethnic and religious conflicts are escalating e.g. Kosovo, Philippines, Nigeria, Iraq and Bosnia, thereby impacting the lives of future generations. These cases, through their outlines examples - attempt to promote the role of Hizmet School's as being bastions of inter-religious tolerance and inter-ethnic harmony [14]. However, these examples by Michel [9] and Mohamed [8] are based on non-scientific observations.

Traditionally, tolerance education has been approached from the perspective of curriculum, textbooks, and instructional strategies in certain subjects, particularly religious subjects. This indicates the importance of these areas in shaping students' perception of tolerance and differences among people and communities as a reality, and continues to improve their attitudes towards the notion of the other. However, tolerance education is not only about explicit curriculum and textbooks, but also about the school culture as a whole, and how it is put into practice. The efforts to research and improve the curriculum of school subjects, which adopted tolerance education are to be applauded, but to accommodate the complexity of the nature of values education, attempts to investigate components of the whole school are strongly encouraged [15]. Hence, the role of the principal, both as a practical leader and education/curriculum manager is an important aspect of tolerance education. Principals have access to influence not only students, but also teachers, and other stakeholders. Good practical leadership and the actual promotion of tolerance by principals, would have a profound impact on students, teachers and stakeholders, encouraging them to adopt the same philosophical and practical approach to tolerance.

Leadership is one of the important components of the school in tolerance education. Since one of the main aims of Hizmet Schools is to achieve world peace through promoting the value of tolerance among staff members, learners and other stakeholders, the leadership style of principals is crucial.

In different schooling systems, leadership plays an important role in the success or failure of its ability to educate learners to become productive citizens. A principal's leadership qualities are paramount in determining this. According to Raihani [15], school leadership plays an important role in tolerance education by providing the necessary vision, being exemplary leaders and active participants in this process. Leadership in a Hizmet School is not merely defined by academic results or organizational management; rather principals are characterised by their ability to adopt a moral-centric leadership style and leading by example [16], through their sense of compassion, dedication and tolerance. Democratic school authorities facilitate the school planning process in which tolerance education is promoted to be an explicit goal of the school [17]. They provide direction for the school and surrounding community, in order to achieve a goal through active participation and involvement, by ensuring effective implementation of tolerance education in their respective school. The practice of democratic and participative decision-making itself is a powerful model for the promotion of tolerance at school [15].

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research paper employed a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research is a form of a social analysis that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live. Atkinson et al. [18] state that it is an umbrella term and number of different approaches exist. Most of these have the same aim to understand the social reality of individuals groups and cultures. Researchers use qualitative approaches to explore the behaviours, perspectives, feelings and experiences of people and what lies at the core of their lives. The schooling environment provides a wide range opportunities for qualitative research methods. This includes focusing on managerial processes of the principals; focusing on their behaviour as a small group, and determining their challenges in tolerance education based on the research question

Interviewing is the most common form of a data collection in qualitative research [19]. Data is collected via focused group interviews. Interviews conducted on three Hizmet Schools in South Africa, which are located in - Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. These three schools being located in three different cities, with diverse cultural, religious, linguistic, racial demographics; will allow for a more comprehensive approach to the research and ensure whether or not the research findings are

reflective of the research question(s). The group of principals, teachers and graduated students were interviewed separately. Each group consisted of 5-8 participants and duration of the interviews were around 60 minutes. My sample comprised 29 participants in total. Three principals were interviewed after finalizing of focused group interviews. It was noticed that after analysing the data captured from focused group interview with the principals, there were not adequate responses for some questions. It was decided by the researcher to conduct semi-structured interviews with 3 principals to get their insight on specific questions. Using this interview method, it allowed the researcher to gain personal insights into participants, their belief systems and their collective and/or uncollected experiences.

Interviews were recorded, with participants' permission on an audio recording device. These recordings were analyzed and the extracted information and data was stored, without any connection to participants' identity. A copy of your input during the interview was sent to after after being transcribed. Participants had the opportunity to check and correct the text of the transcript which they did not intent to mention in the interview or clarify a statement

For this research, an un-directed approach is used to, due to the fact that no existing theory or prior research regarding the topic and questions at hand has been done. Interviews were transcribed and read, notes were taken. List of common ideas and possible themes were generated which were repeated or appeared as patterns in the interviews and notes reviewed. Finally concepts and ideas were grouped into common themes. Each major theme was given a colour code and all transcripts were re-read and colour coded by theme as suggested by Creswell [21]. When themes appear clear and appropriate, the themes were analysed in relations to the research question.

The accuracy, dependability and credibility of the information is depending on how validity and trustworthiness is addressed in researches. Trustworthiness and validity of the data were accomplished by triangulation and member check. Triangulations may be defined as the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspects of human behaviour. Triangular techniques in the social science attempt to map out or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it more than one standpoint [20]. Member check is the method of verifying the information with the participating principals. It allowed the participants to correct to errors or misinterpretations of the researcher [22]

3 FINDINGS

In this section, findings obtained by principals', teachers' and graduated students' opinions about role of principals and their challenges in tolerance education are presented. Besides, direct quotations about opinions of principals, teachers and students are given.

3.1 Role of principals in tolerance education

Participating principals noted that principals, as leaders of the school, have a significant role to play in the promotion or de-promotion of tolerance in the school environment, as indicated by Raihani [15] (2011). Participating principals indicated that they are aware of the role that they play in tolerance education. One the principals said, "Principals attitudes towards tolerance education are formed according to the school's mission and vision. If principals believe in the importance of tolerance education then they will make the necessary planning to mobilize all available resources for this purpose." The principal further explained: "For example, when I employ a new teacher, this is one of the important qualities that I am pursuing from candidates." It is also believed that the principals' personal practices of tolerance in daily life, which is observed by students, teachers, parents and the community, is crucial to stimulate tolerance education at a particular school.

Teachers believe that tolerance education can be achieved by the efforts of the entire school and broader community of stakeholders. Essentially it is team work and the principal is the key component which makes the team work. Teachers believe that in tolerance education, principals play a vital and important role. A participating teacher indicated: "It's vital that principal becomes active in this program that school offers, because I feel if you develop a program, the program wants to see the faces of all the role players, if you are a principal, you want to see the faces, and if you a learner you want to see the face, and if you incorporate the parents, you will want to see the faces as a combined effort to teach this." The role that should be played by the principal was best described and elaborated by one the teachers from a Hizmet School in Cape Town: "I think he needs to set the bar, and he needs to be there when we have assembly, when we teach that values session on a Monday, and he needs to reaffirm and encourage the students again, then they (the students) get it from a higher body, and the

principal is higher than us (teachers) and the students get that feeling, the principal said so and my teacher said so, hence it must be right; therefore what we teach them, they are able to carry it home”

Leading by example to promote tolerance at the school was stress strongly by teachers. A teacher pointed out: “the management or principal doesn’t have to instruct or teach tolerance, but all the time, his behaviour and attitude towards learners, teachers or other members of management or to the parents, must carry that tolerance in all attitudes so that he will be able to effect everyone in the school.”

It is also noted by the graduated students that principals do play a pivotal role in developing the tolerance in the school. One of the graduated student said: “I think it is a collective effort to make tolerance visible. The teachers and principals played a role in promoting tolerance. Each teacher is different and I think without the principal’s leadership teachers cannot do it”

3.2 Challenges of principals

3.2.1 Challenges from teachers:

Participating principals observed and believed that teachers are the actual and central figures in promoting tolerance in a particular school. They are the ones who have direct interaction with the students and impact their hearts and minds. Hence attitudes and practices of teachers on the spot light in school environment. There is no direct or visible resistance or doubt from the teacher to promote and to practice tolerance at the school but there are few issues that principals are concerned about in this regard. One principal underlined that: “Even though all teachers believe that tolerance education and promoting tolerance and other values are crucial, it is not always observed, as all teachers work for this purpose at required levels.” Different qualities, backgrounds, cultures of the teachers sometimes have a negative impact on tolerance education at the school. It was stressed by another principal that: “Teaching tolerance and values and creating a tolerant environment, require extra effort, other than the formal education at the school. Altruism and sacrificing are key to success. Teachers without these qualities affect the motivation of the student and other teachers.” Harmony amongst teachers and their relationship is one of the major issues that principals pointed out. This relationship and harmony is closely observed by the students and depart a message of how the teacher practices tolerance among themselves. A principal from Cape Town indicated his biggest challenge as: “Some teachers cannot internalise the necessity of teaching tolerance which gives him/her extra responsibility. As result of this, he/she has problems with his/her colleagues and the students and impacting the positive setting of the school.” Principals’ challenges with teachers are more the motivation of a particular teacher and the respective teacher’s personal convictions that they bring from their culture, faith and collective narratives.

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Another principal pointed out that: “You also need to create the will from teachers to say “I want to be part of this”; every single teacher, or maybe a learner or parent that wants to be part of it and we need to create that atmosphere; where the principal does not have to beg for anyone to take part in this.”

3.2.2 Challenges from students:

Principals acknowledged that the school is a place of teaching and learning. It is acceptable that students make mistakes. That is why teachers are at school to make them understand and be aware that he/she made a mistake and show them what is right, motivating them not to do it again. Mistakes made by the student should be accepted as an opportunity to teach them what is right from wrong. The effectiveness of tolerance education depends on how students are cooperative and accommodating in the efforts of the school and the teachers. A principal of the Cape Town school indicated that: “the collective negative attitudes of students from same background and closing themselves off from interacting with other students is a big challenge in creating a more tolerant schooling environment. But it happens only to new comers, and there experience is soon normalised, after they are fully adapted into the schooling culture and environment.” Other challenges from students mentioned by the principals are based on a tendency for violent interaction, egocentric attitudes of some students and prejudices, which come from their cultural, religious and racial socialisation in a polarized community.

3.2.3 Challenges from families:

Principals think that parents and the family environment have a substantial impact on teaching tolerance education. From their perspective, principals explained that parents are the biggest challenge in promoting sustainable tolerance education. Racist approaches to matters, a biased mind-set, an aggressive attitude towards problems, none-existent complementary and supplementary support to enhance tolerance by parents, authoritarian format of the family, and the absolute protective style of parenting - are mentioned by principals as their important challenges that they face unremittingly in tolerance education.

The racist mind-set of parents was noted as the most mentioned point by the principals as a tremendous challenge to promote tolerance. A principal pointed out: “Racism is still a serious problem for many parents they still have prejudices about other people. Even though they don’t mention it explicitly, their attitudes, their approach to issues, their communication style is explicit and this gives you the sense of their mind-set. I have many parents who complained about the racist attitudes of teacher towards their child. Jokes among children could be understood as a racist act by the parents. For example I had a meeting with a parent whose child was referred to as “snow man” by child’s friend, this was taken as racist insult by the parents.”

It is also mentioned by principals that non-constructive and aggressive approach to problem solving of issues is a major problem. A principal of a Johannesburg school indicated: “Parents are very aggressive and biased when there is a problem. They don’t have a positive and constructive approach to solving the issue, even in cases where they do not know what happened exactly, they are ready to fight and become aggressive”. The family environment is regarded as a first school in a child’s life and a suitable platform to exercise what is learnt at actual school. Due to the family structure in South Africa, principals are very concerned about the support they get from the family for tolerance education and any other schooling issues in a broader sense. One of the principals said: “We can teach all the moral values system and tolerance but the problem is in the broader society, the backgrounds are different and then parents who says negative things and stereotypes about others, make it very difficult to promote tolerance.”

The family structure in African culture is perceived as an authoritarian style. This also affects the student’s mind-set and their practices in tolerance. It is observed that students are confused about the practicality of tolerance, because in their respective families, things do not work, as it is taught at school. As it was stated by one of the participants: “Children are brought up in a culture which doesn’t allow children to talk and express their ideas in front of their elders. There are very few families who have a democratic culture. This situation obscures children and you observe this confusion in their thoughts and their actions which makes our job more difficult.”

3.2.4 Challenges from media:

Given the nature of 21st century technology and the advent of the 24 hour rapid news cycle, participants highlighted the important of media in the promotion of tolerance among communities and students. Media however, can also have the reverse effect – by portraying negative stereotypes and prejudice, hence enforcing intolerance. They noted that media plays a significant role, even though indirectly, in shaping tolerance and intolerance.

Participating principals are of the opinion that students and learners access to negative propaganda by any means of media should be managed and their attention should rather be channeled to more productive and constructive activities, allowing them to embrace the value of tolerance, but at the same time be aware that negative stereotypes and preju dice portrayed in media. This management and empowerment would allow young minds to be proactive in dispelling these prejudice and stereotypes which are found being propagated through mass media channels. Necessity of this kind of management by responsible parties, was indicated by a participant as: “Parents must be very cautious and selective when their children dealing with any means of media. Media is generally full of examples of how different people don’t get along which contradict to what we are trying to promote.” Principals noted that efforts done by the school to produce more tolerant people is basically affected by the negative impact of all forms of media. Trying to change this negative impact is not easy and makes the principals to be more vigilant to motivate parents and teachers to manage impact of the media.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The notion of tolerance and the perception of tolerance in educational discourse have been discussed, especially in this era, where there is a need for the respect human rights and moral values. These discussions play a significant role in promoting and enhancing the true, acceptable and practical meaning of tolerance. It is hoped that learning about the challenges of Hizmet Schools principals in their tolerance education practices would help educational practitioners to tackle the problems in tolerance education.

There is no specific strategies emphasized by principals in order to promote tolerance. There is a will that says this needs to be done but how to it is not very clear. There is no clear and specific strategies or systems put into place for tolerance education. One teacher underlined that: "It is expected from the learners to tolerate each other, it is expected from the teachers to teach tolerance but there is no specific way that is brought to the table that this is what is planned and this is what we are going to do and push." It was recommended by a teacher, that principals should have meetings regularly with teachers and create a sense of belonging, as well as a sense of trust and team spirit. This will help teachers to come on the board and help principals more to develop new effective strategies.

The most significant and frazzled problem noted by the participants is that changing of principals often. This is seen as the biggest challenge for the school to have a solid and sustainable strategy for tolerance education. It is very well explained by a teacher from Cape Town School: "I think continuation is very important, like if you start something you have to continue it, and you are talking about principals, I find it very confusing in our school, because every principal comes with a different approach, I find it extremely stressful and difficult not only from a teachers perspective but from a learners perspective as well because I hear learners speaking, this principal did this and that principal did that, so I feel like for management they should be some kind of consistency, it's confusing for us as staff and parents also to understand that every principal comes with a different set of rules and it becomes very difficult to tolerate, because we are the same but the principals changed so imparting on or trying to achieve long term gets cut, so that means we have to start all over again, it becomes stressful and unhappy situation not only for staff but generally for everyone. It's totally confusing." This can be related to remarks made by principals about the role of teachers in helping supporting principals in tolerance education. Changing principals often demotivate teachers and working with demotivated teachers to promote tolerance at the school is an important challenge for principals.

Principals believe that they have a significant role in promoting tolerance and creation a tolerant school. All teachers and graduated students believe that principals in their personal relations with them, practice an outstanding level of tolerance. Principals received credit about how they adopt tolerance in their lives and teachers find this very encouraging. When it comes to management of the school and leading the entire schooling community for tolerance education they received criticism and recommendations as well. Most of the teachers criticized principals for not be very visible within the school premises. When students see the principal and as a leader who is acting as a part of all the running programs at the school, they become more motivated, encouraged and cautious to practice what is promoted by the principal and the teachers. This challenge of principals is also connected to issue of changing principals often. It takes time for principals who come from another country or another city makes principal to get used to education system, culture and and new stake holders of the school. This situation makes principals less visible by teachers and students.

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It is also seen as a challenge for principals that some teachers want to promote tolerance, however they are not tolerant to their fellow colleagues and teachers. It was recommended that principals as well as teachers among themselves, should focus on harmonising tolerance amongst teachers to ensure the maximum reach of tolerance education. It would be a flawed process if teachers, who cannot practice tolerance with each other, but attempt to teach tolerance education to students. Hence it is suggested that team building activities, group discussions and forums among teachers are encouraged to promote tolerance and ideas of tolerance among teachers. Principals develop a sense to promote tolerance not merely as a teacher-student, teacher-parent, principal-teacher, principal-parent or principal-student issues, but be more inclusive to focus on a teacher-teacher basis to fully extend the potential of a harmonized and tolerant schooling environment.

Based on these findings, we understand that tolerance education is not an easy idea and concept to develop within a schooling environment. The importance of the role of principals can be understood as being pivotal in the promotion of tolerance in education, however, other stakeholders such as teachers, parents, community and external influences cannot be disregarded – as they can have positive and even negative effects of tolerance. Hence, good leadership practiced by principals can have a long lasting effect in binding different stakeholders together, for the common good and for the ultimate promotion and betterment of society through tolerance education and universal values.

The findings also give a departure point on Hizmet Schools and its ideals of teaching tolerance education and promoting the culture of tolerance education. The research has given insight into the success, challenges and possible opportunities for Hizmet Schools – and provides for the Hizmet Movement a foundational base to improve its efforts for teaching tolerance at their respective schools.

These findings provide researchers, educational practitioners and academics with a unique opportunity to further study the outcomes of these findings, for further research, to investigate the role of the whole school in promoting tolerance, and its impact on the broader society. Another opportunity would for further research could focus on the role of Hizmet Schools in promoting tolerance in high-conflict ridden areas and polarized regions of the world, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, the Balkans, South East Asia and Central Asia etc.

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