

Evaluating the Role that Monastic Educational Principles Play in Education in Monastic Boy Schooling in Gauteng Province, South Africa

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Abstract

Monastic education has a rich history rooted in discipline, community, intellectual pursuits and spirituality. Every year, parents all over South Africa are posed with the question of selecting a school for their children. This article aims to evaluate the role of monastic educational principles in shaping the educational experiences within monastic schools. In a modern context, these principles continue to play a significant role in the development of students within monastic schools nurturing well-rounded learners for life after school. This paper adopted a qualitative approach and included a total of 12 participants from four schools. The principals and two department heads from each school were chosen to provide a thorough evaluation of the role that monastic educational principles play in education in monastic schools. By examining and exploring the ways in which monastic educational principles are implemented, this article highlights the enduring influence of monastic traditions in education and underscores their relevance in preparing young men for a well-rounded and meaningful life. This article was authored to assist with the understanding of the value that these kinds of schools have in our educational system. It is evident from the findings and affirmations of the participants that there are both advantages and disadvantages when evaluating the role monastic educational principles play in education in monastic schools. The recommendations of the study include that there should be a strong emphasis by teachers, department heads and principals on the application of monastic principles as there is a direct link to strong academic performance.

Keywords: academic performance, department heads, discipline, experience, monastic principle, principals

Introduction

This article aims to assess the impact of monastic educational principles on the educational framework of schools in the Gauteng province, South Africa. Additionally, it delves into the lasting influence of these principles across all monastic schools. Monastic education refers to a network of schools, nationwide, run by monasteries and

nunneries that have long provided free education to learners of all backgrounds, namely those who are from communities that are poor and). Monastic principles are a way of living that's religious, isolated from other people, and self-disciplined (Myanmar Education Consortium, 2013). The history of monastic education, according to Lall and South (2013) dates back over 1 000 years to the Bagan era (1044–1287). This is when Theravada Buddhism was first established by King Anawrahta, in what is today known as lower Myanmar. Drawing upon a rich historical legacy, monastic education has evolved over centuries to provide a unique approach to teaching and learning.

According to Schedneck et al. (2019), young boys in monastic schools learned to read, write and follow the basic tenets of religion. Despite the ever-growing advancements in educational methodologies, the core principles of monastic education, such as discipline, community and a holistic approach to education, continue to shape the educational experiences in monastic schools. As stated by Chen (2023), based on different places where educational activities happen, education can be divided into school education, family education and community education, each of which contains many specific educational forms.

Through an in-depth understanding and evaluation of these principles and their implementation, this article aims to highlight the significance of monastic education and the role that monastic educational principles play in education in monastic schools.

Literature Review

Describing the evaluation of the role that monastic educational principles play in education in monastic schools within the Gauteng province has proven to be challenging due to the lack of research conducted on the current topic. According to Travers (1987), there are many ways of defining educational objectives, each with advantages and disadvantages. In most cases, parents will try to choose a school that will offer their child the best holistic education experience and opportunity. The decision ultimately depends on the preference, the affordability, the educational satisfaction and the educational objectives of the educational institution. As discussed by Helguera and Pow (2011), the concept of learning emphasises the importance of prioritising critical pedagogy and evaluating how issues are connected to the inherent power dynamics within social, institutional, and political relations to achieve social emancipation. Through an in-depth examination of these principles and their implementation, the researcher aims to highlight the significance of monastic educational principles in nurturing the intellectual, spiritual and moral growth of students within a monastic context.

Theoretical framework

Monastic education aims to instil moral and ethical values in individuals, guiding them towards a virtuous and disciplined life. This often involves adherence to a set of rules or vows unique to the monastic order. According to Sapardi (2023), in education, it is a continual process and opportunity to overcome ignorance, avarice and animosity, ultimately fostering personal growth towards an improved life. Monastic education is distinct from mainstream educational systems and often emphasises religious studies, moral and ethical teachings and practical skills necessary for a monastic life. This is perhaps due to the orientation of monastic learning (Herngseng, 2023). Monastic education is often communal, with individuals living and learning together in a

monastery. This communal living fosters a sense of brotherhood and provides a supportive environment for spiritual growth. Many South African schools which have been strongly influenced by monasticism have gained customs, traditions and ways of life linked to the history and origins of the initial ideology of monasticism. Monastic communities usually have a hierarchical structure with experienced members serving as mentors or spiritual guides for novices and less-experienced individuals. This mentorship helps transmit the teachings and traditions of the order. According to Papaconstantinou (2023), Schroeder reveals the strong hierarchies and relations of domination that were mediated through the discourse of childhood in those secluded micro-societies. Although hierarchy plays a significant and pivotal role in many all-boy schools in the Gauteng province, it is ultimately the responsibility of the principal to oversee the extent and levels of importance and virtue associated with this hierarchy within the school. As stated by Kaplan (2020), education is an essential function in any human society. Monastic education has played a crucial role in preserving cultural and intellectual heritage, contributing to the development of art, literature and knowledge in various societies throughout history.

Intellectual Growth

According to Shah (2019), the first recording of monastic education dates to the eleventh century (AD). Monastic education is said to have been started by the lowland Theravada Buddhist population, and specifically amongst the (majority) Bamar ethnic group. The growth and pursuit of knowledge is deeply ingrained in monastic educational principles. Chomsky (2015) argues that what truly educates, is not the curriculum covered in class; rather, it is the discoveries one makes within the classroom setting. Monastic schools encourage students to engage in critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, as well as the hunger for knowledge across various fields. A strong academic curriculum, supplemented by a wide variety of extracurricular activities, drives learners to explore diverse subjects, which in turn creates a love for learning and bettering oneself.

Spiritual Growth

Monastic schools recognise the importance of fostering spiritual growth through education. As suggested by Shar, Lopes and Cardozo (2019), monastic education transmits matters which are culturally and intellectually standardised across all sectors within society. Its purpose was to ensure that discipline was instilled to allow rulers to maintain authority over their subjects and to ensure that respect for tradition and hierarchy was reinforced. According to Hughes (2022), education comprises a combination of activities, rituals and regular habits designed to instil a specific conception of a fulfilling life. This is achieved by embedding or imparting this vision into one's innermost self, be it the heart or stomach, through tangible and embodied practices. Deeply rooted in the teaching of a particular faith tradition, these types of schools provide a space for students to explore and deepen their own spiritual beliefs. According to Geikina and Balode (2019), the hermeneutic approach asserts that academic pursuits should be integrated into a comprehensive journey towards spirituality, underscoring the importance of academic studies in fostering and advancing spiritual development. Spiritual beliefs and commitment to the school are

integrated into the daily life of the boys, in promoting character growth and sense of purpose in academic achievements.

Moral Growth

Monastic boy schools prioritise the moral growth and development of their learners holistically, while recognising that education extends well beyond intellectual growth. According to Chitra and Gurung (2021), there are eight dimensions of value that education needs to transfer to the learners which are natural, social, cultural, intellectual, academic, aesthetic, spiritual and moral elements. These eight dimensions are transferred through the curriculum and co-curricular activities, but also in an environment that ensures that respect, care, support, warmth and delight are provided. Physical fitness, emotional well-being, good health, artistic expression and social skills are valued alongside academic achievements. As stated by Cromarty (2019), the activity which promotes self-discovery and personal development, while nurturing a wide perspective on society, is known as meditation. It involves active engagement in practices that encourage peace, benevolence and empathy. By fostering all aspects of a learner's being, monastic schools produce well-rounded individuals that are well-prepared and capable of achieving and being valued members of society.

From the above, it is notable that monastic educational principles continue to be an integral part of the educational experience in monastic schools. The combination of discipline, community and holistic education provides learners with a unique yet enriching environment that nurtures their intellectual, spiritual and moral growth. While simultaneously adapting to society in a modern context and not being blinkered, monastic schools strive to preserve their principles, ensuring and maintaining their ethos and impact in shaping the lives of young gentlemen. By embracing the enduring legacy of monastic education, monastic boy schools serve as beacons of educational excellence in the educational sector.

Research Design and Methods

The research study was carried out in the Johannesburg East and Ekurhuleni North districts in the Gauteng province, South Africa.

A qualitative data approach was followed in this study to evaluate the role that monastic educational principles play in education in monastic schools in the Gauteng province. No surveys or written reports were used. Interviews were conducted where all data was captured through an audio recording application. As noted by Roulston (2009), to achieve success while interviewing for qualitative data, the researcher is required to skillfully build strong connections with participants, draw out detailed information, emotions and accounts which are factual and contribute to in-depth descriptions of experiences. The researcher also needs to foster a sense of trust with the participants which will enable them to openly share their stories in an unbiased and honest manner. The researchers felt that this type of study better suited a qualitative approach. This is due to the statement made by Lester, Cho and Lochmiller (2020) that suggests that qualitative research is generally used to assist the researcher in developing a profound and nuanced understanding of a given phenomenon.

This data was gathered by means of face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with 12 participants. The 12 participants comprised of one principal and two department heads from each of four different schools. The option to have the interview via Zoom was given

to each participant because COVID-19 was still prevalent. However, all participants were happy to do a face-to-face interview. The research objectives and the characteristics of the study determined the types of schools selected for this particular study in order to conduct the research required. A purposive sampling method was used for this particular research study. Purposive sampling, as emphasised by Mikecz (2012), is the preferred method, particularly for researchers who aim to track a process through interviews with a specific, predetermined group of individuals chosen based on particular criteria, namely that they had knowledge and understanding of the role that monastic educational principles played in their schools. This approach requires the researchers to identify and contact the interviewees. The participants comprised of both men and woman across all four schools. These four schools were specifically chosen to provide insight into the role that monastic educational principles play in education in monastic boy schools.

The 12 interviews were conducted on the property of the schools of each participant, and at a time that was convenient for each of the participants. As stated by Saarijärvi and Bratt (2021), in-person interviews are the norm for carrying out qualitative interviews. All data was audio recorded with the permission of each of the participants and the details of interviews were captured verbatim. Each of the participants provided an in-depth understanding and evaluation of the role that monastic educational principles play in education in their school. It was ensured that all questions were answered to the best of the participants' ability and understanding. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study and data collected, the research methods and strategies complied with ethical principles throughout the data collection process. This was also communicated constantly to all participants throughout the duration of the research.

As highlighted by Chauvette, Schick-Makaroff and Molzahn (2019, citing the OECD, 2007), in the context of qualitative research, open-ended questions offer several benefits, such as strengthening open scientific inquiry, fostering new research endeavours and promoting diversity in analysis and opinions. The interviews undertaken by each of the participants focused on the benefits and challenges presented by offering education using monastic educational principles in monastic schools.

Ethical Considerations

An approved consent letter for the four schools to participate in the research study was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education. An invitation letter was sent to each of the 12 participants who had been selected. A reply to the invitation served as confirmation by the participant to take part in the study. The invitation provided comprehensive details about the study, including information about consent, assurances of voluntariness, confidentiality and anonymity. It also included a commitment to maintaining a research process that was benign, caring, and fair.

Furthermore, it was explained to each participant that should they wish at any time to withdraw or not continue in the study, their decision would be completely accepted. The participants were also informed about the use of the audio recorder, the use of the data and the availability of the recorded data, as well as the autonomy and confidentiality of the data at the end of the research period. Each participant also received a document at the start of each interview to record their attendance, the date and time which was signed by each of the 12 participants. The majority of the interviews

took place after school and on the school campus of each of the participants, ensuring that the time and place was convenient to them. In addition, most of the interviews lasted between 15 and 20 minutes. Pseudonyms were used to disguise participants' identities and their respective schools. Participants were referred to as participant 1 (principal)/ participant 2 (department head 1) and participant 3 (department head 2) and schools were referred to and used to identify as School A, School B, School C and School D. This was done to ensure complete anonymity and confidentiality.

Findings: Threats to the role that monastic educational principles play in education in monastic boy schools.

Department Heads' Responses

According to the department heads, there are both positives and negatives with regard to the role that monastic educational principles play in education in their schools. According to Sukmayanti et al. (2021) and Wijayanti and Fauziah (2020), educators play a vital role in aiding the improvement of the quality of education in educational institution, such as schools. The creativity of the educator not only aids the learning process by ensuring holistic development, but also includes aspects such as their content knowledge, enthusiasm about the content and their ability to ensure that teaching is done quickly and efficiently. The following are the negative remarks made about the role that monastic educational principles play in education in their schools:

"Yes, if you don't have strong principles, you don't have strong discipline. Boys like structure, they don't like grey areas. This allows for an environment of strong academic performance." – DH 2B

"With the history, heritage and tradition of this school, monastic education creates a sense of pride, and therefore pushes boys to work hard." – DH 2A

"I do think there is a link, I think that for a large number of boys, particular for those that may struggle academically, this kind of environment allows for them to improve their personal academic performance because of the strong principles." – DH 3C

It must be noted that all the participants felt that there were more positives than negatives regarding the role of monastic educational principles in education in their schools. The role of monastic educational principles are multifaceted and comprise of various aspects of the educational experience within a monastic school. This is affirmed by Kaplan (2020) who suggests that analysing educational content can provide valuable evidence about the essence of an entire cultural heritage, and investigating changes in curricula may uncover disputes, adjustments and innovations within that tradition throughout history.

Principals' Responses

As highlighted by Clark (2012), school principals are acknowledged as leaders and managers who have a significant impact on the wellbeing of their school by establishing the atmosphere and guiding the educational activities. A school principal has the responsibility to oversee and guide his educators, to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all educators and learners and to ensure that a high standard of education is maintained

in an environment conducive to all parties involved. The role school principals play in assisting educators to enhance the quality of education through professional conduct to advance the level of education is essential, according to Husaini and Fitria (2019). Furthermore, the responsibilities of a principal include creating an environment for teaching, learning and fostering a culture that will nurture children into young adults. When called upon to evaluate the role that monastic educational principles play in education in monastic schools in Gauteng, the principals provided the following insights:

I believe there is a link between prominent monastic principles and strong academic, sporting and cultural performance and I think that is because your roots as a school are very deep, you know who you are as a school, you are comfortable in your skin as school and the hopefully as a headmaster you are comfortable with what the strategy and vision is, the boys who attend, the teachers who work here, the parents who are part of our community understand what we stand for and because of that I think that gives boys a sense of comfort which allows them to perform optimally.” – P 1B

“I think within a school environment there is definitely a level of heightened achievement, competitiveness, I think monastic education brings out the best in our boys. I believe the structures of monastic education enhance strong academic performance.” – P 1A

“I believe that strong monastic principles lay a foundation for our learners and therefore create a structure with a support system whereby our learners achieve and perform to their best academically – P 1D

Nasreen (2019) posits that school principals play a crucial role to ensure efficient functioning and management of a school. It was crucial that the principals, as heads of their schools, provided their valued insight on the evaluation of the role that monastic educational principles play in education in their schools. There was a unanimous agreement and emphasis among the four principals that monastic educational principles create an environment that nurtures well-rounded learners. The principals were also honest and voiced their concerns and the challenges posed by the role that monastic educational principals play in education in their schools. In addition, all four principals agreed that they had the sole responsibility for ensuring that the monastic educational principles contribute in a positive way. They indicated that they were accountable for managing any potential negative consequences and impacts of monastic principles, aiming to control and mitigate these factors to uphold a nurturing and holistic learning and teaching environment.

The findings derived from interviews with all participants revealed a consensus that monastic educational principles in education at monastic schools in Gauteng can have both positive and negative outcomes. According to Nasreen (2019), school principals and teachers play a significant role in ensuring that there is a facilitative learning atmosphere within schools. These professionals belong to a profession where ongoing professional development is essential in order to ensure the success of future generations. It is notable that the principals acknowledged that they were responsible and accountable for the role that monastic educational principles play in education in their schools. In addition, according to Chen (2023), the promotion of human development and overall societal progress can only be achieved by synergistically combining the advantages and functioning of various forms of education. In brief, this

denotes a common agreement among department heads and principals that the application of monastic principles in education in their schools fosters a holistic environment that is conducive to nurturing well-rounded young individuals.

Discussion

To understand the true value of the role that monastic educational principles play in education in monastic schools in the Gauteng province, the researcher felt it was critical to interview both middle management (department heads) and top management (principals) to seek a thorough and true understanding of this value. The study recognises that there are both advantages and disadvantages in using monastic educational principles in education in monastic schools. The department heads confirmed that there is positive attitude regarding the role that monastic educational principles play in education in their schools but are also not blind to the possible presence of negative connotations that can be present and fostered if implemented incorrectly.

The study further recognises that the principals are accountable and responsible for the correct implementation of monastic educational principles in their schools. Indeed, the participants affirmed the research of Hughes (2022), Chen (2023) and Shar, Lopes and Cardozo (2019) who indicated the importance of the creation of a holistic environment supported by monastic educational principles that fosters the nurturing of well-rounded learners motivated to succeed in a variety of fields.

Conclusions

The study evaluated the role that monastic educational principles play in education in monastic schools in Gauteng. The results of the study showed that all the participants valued and paid tribute to the positive outcomes that monastic educational principles have in their schools. Furthermore, it is important to take note that the participants also voiced their concerns regarding the possibility of negative connotations related to monastic educational principles in a boys' school. However, they all agreed that accountability lay with the principals for the implementation of monastic educational principles in their schools.

The participants also shared the similar thoughts and opinions regarding the fact that even though the world is evolving every day, and that no school is a 100% fit for any learner, monastic schools should maintain the monastic educational principles, as this is what sets them apart and helps foster and nurture well-rounded learners for life after school.

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