

The Experiences of Learners from Non-Christian Religious Backgrounds in Learning Christian Religious Education in a Developing Country

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Abstract – In the Kingdom of Eswatini, all learners in primary schools, irrespective of their religious background are expected to do Christian-based Religious Education. The purpose of this study was to establish the experiences of learners from non-Christian backgrounds in learning Christian-based Religious Education curriculum in Eswatini primary schools. This study was qualitative in nature, and it used a case study research design to determine the experiences of learners from non-Christian religious backgrounds in learning the Christian-based Religious Education in Eswatini primary schools. Six learners were purposively sampled from each school. The six purposively sampled learners were interviewed in their school settings. Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was then used to analyse the gathered data. The study also revealed that the kingdom of Eswatini is multi-religious in nature, but it is anticipated that all primary school learners learn Christianity religion only in their Religious Education classes. It was revealed from the study that learners from non-Christian religious background feel left out by the system while some do not believe in the content taught in this subject. Further, the study concluded that learners from the non-Christian backgrounds believe that the learners from Christian backgrounds have an advantage over them as what they learn at school is what they learn at church as well. The study recommends that the Religious Education syllabus be formulated in such a way that it caters for all religious backgrounds of the learners in schools.

Keywords: Curriculum, Non-Christian religion, Christian-based Education, Religious Education, Education

Background to the study

All children have the right to receive non-discriminatory education and this discrimination is usually based on ethnicity, religion, economic status, refugee status, language, gender and disability (UNESCO, 2012). Specific measures must be taken by the State to implement these rights in all learning environments (UNESCO, 2006). Akubue (1992) in Ilechukwu & Ugwuozor (2014), define religion from a Biblical notion, which can be seen as a relation in which man stands to God, conscious of God's absolute majesty and infinite power and his other insignificance, helplessness and dependence on God.

Faith-based education in the United States dates back to 1606, when the first Catholic school was established and it is now known as St. Augustine, Florida (White House Domestic Policy Council, 2008). A common view, based on a simplistic reading of legislation, is of the codification of confessional but non-denominational Religious Education in 1944, followed by a switch in 1988 to a non-confessional world religions approach, in which Christianity was quantitatively but not qualitatively favoured (UK Government, 1944; 1988). Historians of Religious Education have also pointed out that this is a naïve reading of more complex social, political and educational processes (Copley, 1997 as cited in Long, 2016).

In Nigeria, Traditional education in pre-colonial Nigeria, taught almost all aspects of human knowledge except Christian Religious Education (Rakum, 2017). Christian Religious Education (CRE) also referred to as Bible Knowledge (B.K.), Christian Religious Knowledge (CRK), Christian Religious Studies (CRS), is education God has intentionally prepared with the aim of saving all human beings, who have fallen short of his glory (Rakum, 2017). This is a subject that takes its entire content from the Bible. It started being taught in Nigeria during the advent of Christian Missionaries who brought Christianity along with formal education. Missionary groups who

first started teaching it in schools, churches, theological institutions, secular schools, during open preaching, public lectures, seminars, conferences and workshops include the Church Missionary Society (CMS), Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans and the Roman Catholics (Ifedili&Ochuba, 2009 in Rakum, 2017). When western types of education started in Nigeria, Christian Religious Education formed part of the Curriculum. The CRE was taught in all missionary schools, in addition to public schools that were located in Christian dominated areas (Ifedili&Ochuba, 2009 in Rakum, 2017).

Christian Religious Education was introduced by the missionaries mainly for evangelical purposes. In the mission schools, the local people were taught how to read and write using the Bible as the main reference book (Onsongo, 2008 as cited in Jebungei, 2013). Schools were used as focal centres for winning converts as the Christian missionaries had a preconceived idea that Africans could easily be converted to Christianity through schooling. This means that schools are viewed as agents of change because even in Eswatini, schools are viewed as centres of care and support and agents of change (EDSEC Policy, 2011). Schools in Kenya started and ended the day with prayers and hymns and although other subjects were later taught, they were only included because they were supportive to the Christian instruction. Christian Religious Education further moulds the students into mature persons who will positively contribute towards the good of their nation (Jebungei, 2013).

Similarly, in Zambia, Christian Religious Education was introduced by colonialists but brought more complications to the indigenous Zambians, which then forced the government of Zambia to introduce major reforms to this subject after independence (Chizelu, 2006). In 1971, the Ministry of Education together with religious groupings approved a non-denominational Religious Education syllabus for Zambian primary schools (Kamanga, 2013). In 1973, a joint RE syllabus was developed for Junior Secondary level (Forms 1-2) and it was named Developing in Christ. It was adapted from the Gaba Pastoral Institute in Uganda. In 1975, the Roman Catholics developed, "Christian Living Today" as an alternative RE syllabus at senior level. Subsequent to the 1977 Educational Reforms, the RE syllabuses had to be revised to suit a multi-religious approach and to incorporate Zambian Humanism promoted by former president Kenneth Kaunda. Specifically, Religious Education in Zambia is taught using two syllabuses, and they are the 2044 and 2046 (Kamanga, 2013). Syllabus 2044's basic aims to help pupils to see society, tradition and the church, judge according to the Bible and act be Christ-like, whereas, Syllabus 2046 is based on a biblical model of Religious Education. It also uses the biblical theme approach where knowledge of Christian beliefs and values is paramount. Worth noting is that these two syllabuses are also being currently reviewed so as to accommodate the growing multi-religious Zambian society. The Curriculum Development Centre (CDC, 2000) as cited in Kamanga (2013) clearly states that every curriculum should respond to recent developments taking place in the Zambian society and in the education sector according to Educating Our Future which has become a cornerstone of formal education.

The Aims of Teaching Christian Religious Education

The Cardus Education Survey (2011) reveals that in the 18th century, the purpose of education in the U.S. was centered on religion and that early religious schools in New England were created to ensure that the Puritan faith was passed on from generation to generation as required by the Old Deluder Satan Act of 1647. For three centuries, it was assumed public schooling was rooted in the Christian faith (Cardus Education Survey, 2011). Again, Christian Religious Education also aims to provide an opportunity for children to grow in the Christian faith. Christian Religious Education also aims to foster in learners moral education and also to make them aware that salvation is only through Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ only. Lastly, it aims to foster charity to the learners through tithing (Cardus Education Survey, 2011).

Njoku and Njoku (2015) states that the Nigerian Christian Religious Education is inclusive because it centres around teaching learners to respect the views and feelings of others. Christian Religious Education was also included at primary school level to raise a generation of people who are not self-centred, but people who respect the views and feelings of others, appreciate dignity of labour (Njoku and Njoku, 2015). The National Policy of Education (2004) on the other hand states that Religious Education to them aims to provide more opportunity for the Nigerian youth to learn more about God and thereby develop their faith in him, to enable the youth to accept Christ as savior and to enable learners to allow the Holy Spirit to guide them in their daily activities. Lastly, it aims to prepare the youth for higher education and for service to the community (Njoku and Njoku, 2015). Sunday and Mordi (2017) reveals that Christian Religious Education instils discipline and obedience to learners.

In Uganda the situation is such that the Christian Religious Education curriculum is aimed at Christian maturity so as to develop a positive awareness of one's own worth to the learners. Secondly, to develop a positive attitude towards other people and their right to hold beliefs different from their own and lastly to respond positively to what they believe to be the will of God (Byaruhanga, 2018).

Learners' Religious Backgrounds

Preconceived perceptions of subjects and their instructors may impact a student's view of the content being taught (Pruitt et.al. 2010 as cited Peterson, 2017). Not only does a student's perception of the content impact learning, but prior knowledge also influences a student's ability to assimilate and or accommodate new knowledge (Gurlitt&Renkl, 2010 in Markharm, 2012). The act of faith is of its very nature a free act. Christ invited people to faith and conversion, without coercing them (Buchanan, 2012). De Souza (2012) states that the Christian Ethics Course (CEC) only has positive outcomes to Christian learners who are willing to learn from it, but non-Christians view this subject as a time waster and of no use at all in their lives and Ukraine is famous for making controversial decisions and laws that also breach the country's constitution. Klocker, Trenerry& Webster (2011) also reveal that learners in Ukraine view the government's act of deciding which religion should be taught in schools such as the Christian Ethics Course as an act of wanting to prolong their childhood as children are inherently known to be receptive and take everything they are told by adults. Nye (2009) in O'Farell (2016) on the other hand, states that before schools foster spirituality in learners, the religious background of parents or guardians of the learners must be taken into consideration because some learners are not affiliated to any religion or some learners may be affiliated to a different religion than the one fostered by the school. Learners' religious backgrounds should be used to interpret their spirituality because parents have a huge influence on their children's spirituality. Klocker, et.al. (2011) further state that a child brought up in Christianity will easily respond to Christian Religious Education and perceive it positively unlike one from a non-Christian background or one from a non-religious background.

Learners may sometimes come to class with prior perceptions. What becomes an advantage is that the teacher possesses the ability to influence and change their prior perceptions and expectations (Klassen&Tze, 2014). Contrary to that is that, if a student has accumulated a specific perspective over time, it is much more of a barrier even with effective teaching practices. Pruitt et.al., (2010) disclose that the perceptions learners bring into the classroom environment may gauge the level of their engagement in the teaching and learning process. Some of these perceptions are word of mouth from former students about the teacher, while others may be having no interest in the subject content and therefore have a negative perception. Some of these perceptions may also come from learner's prior experience with a specific teacher or subject matter (Yerdelen-Damar&Aydin, 2015). A learner's perception of success in the classroom environment is often tied to their current and future motivation to learn (Hagay&Baram-Tsabari, 2015: Lemley et al., 2014). Although Christian educators truly desire for students to be transformed internally, it is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit to change someone's heart (Peterson, 2017).

Depongoro and Waterworth (2011) as cited in Klocker, et.al. (2011) states that in Australia and Indonesia they saw the western educational forms as agents of Islamophobia and philosophies that would mislead the people into questioning the basis of their religious faith. Moreover, it was thought to be not only non-Muslim but also anti-Muslim in its tacit acceptance of a morality that is opposed to Islam. Some learners think that teachers' religious convictions will have an influence on the content they are taught. Damons (2016) alludes to the fact that teachers tend to teach Religious Instruction rather than Religious Observation, as a Muslim teacher can sometimes end up teaching learners how to pray in Islam as compared to teaching them the doctrines of Islam. Participating in activities of Christian Religious Education is viewed as a form of discrimination by learners as it disregards their religious convictions. The South African National Policy on Religious Education which came into effect in September 2003 prohibits teachers from coercing learners to partake in religious observances of a religion that is not their own (Hodgson, 2010). Damons (2016) also states that CRE classes are sometimes educated by educator stereotyping. Educator stereotyping happens when teachers tell learners that Muslims all grow up to become terrorists. Again, addressing traditional healers as witch doctors is a form of negative stereotyping that is against the South African Religious Education Policy of 2003 (Hodgson, 2010).

In view of the above assertions, the study tried to highlight that learners' religious background can hinder the successful assimilation of new content. For instance, learners of a varied religious conviction may find it difficult

to allow the education system to socialize those using Christian principles, knowing very well that their own religion is equally capable of instilling morals and developing their spirituality. In other words, previous knowledge can hinder the assimilation of new knowledge.

Attitude Learners Have on Christian Religious Education

Lawal (2010) states that poor performance occurred yearly between year 2000 and year 2010 in Nigeria because the learners were failing to take the subject seriously as it teaches the same content all year round. He further observed that more learners are shunning Christian Religious Knowledge (CRK) and further saw this alarming rate of poor performance in CRK as grounds for generating concern from stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, schools and government. Kamanga (2013): Lawal (2010) discovered that learners found Christian Religious Education classes to be boring because the teaching and learning process followed a similar pattern on a daily basis, such as, having an introduction, scripture reading, teacher explanation and note taking. One learner said dozing in this subject was a normal occurrence among learners. Again, teachers' biasness was also cited as a contributing factor to learners' negative attitudes on this subject.

However, in Kenya learners have a positive attitude towards this subject because it is easy to pass but are not willing to do it at tertiary level because it is the least important among all the subjects they were doing at Secondary and Primary school level (Itolondo, 2012). Jebungei (2013) on the other hand states that Kenyan learners generally have a negative attitude towards this subject mainly because the emphasis is always on Maths and Sciences and that school administrators hardly make an emphasis on this subject. Learners also complain that they sometimes fail to take this subject seriously because they are never motivated enough like it is done in Maths and Sciences (Itolondo, 2012). Some learners in Kenya also mention that this subject has a wide syllabus which then mounts some unnecessary exam pressure on them.

Long (2016) discovered that learners in England question the existence of Jesus Christ and the credibility of miracles. These learners are not only from non-Christian backgrounds but some even subscribe to Christianity. The Cardus Education Survey (2011) also revealed that the non-ending emphasis on faith and also teaching the same content and using the same strategies has made learners to predict the outcomes of this subject. Some learners even bunk classes stating that lessons here are procedure dominated.

Statement of the problem

The Christian-based Religious Education in the kingdom of Eswatini has disregarded the fact that the Kingdom is multi-religious and still very much rooted to its cultural values, which are also supported by the Swazi Traditional Religion (STR). Primary school learners from a Non-Christian background are disadvantaged by the education system because of Circular No.1 of 2017 which allowed only Christianity to be taught in Religious Education classes in Eswatini schools. The circular has disregarded the fact that Eswatini is a fast-growing, multi-religious society and thus this directive has infringed a constitutional right of learners, parents and teachers from non-Christian backgrounds (U.S. Department of State, 2016). Government basically went against a constitution they are supposed to honour, defend and uphold.

Research Methodology

Rajasekar et.al. (2013) defines research methodology as a way to systematically solve a research problem. Research methodology may also be understood as a science of studying how research is done scientifically (Kothari 2004). This section will discuss the research approach, research design, and data collection instruments, population, sampling and data analysis.

In this study a qualitative research approach was used. Qualitative research is a research method that is concerned with subjective assessments of attitudes, views and behavior (Tome, Cesario&Soares, 2019). Research done qualitatively is a function of researcher's insights and impressions (Kothari, 2004). The desire was to establish the experiences non-Christian religion learners have had in learning the Christian-based Religious Education curriculum and the impact it has on them.

The qualitative research approach was used in this study because it simplifies information collected from the field and in this study, information will shed light on the experiences of non-Christian religion learners in learning Christian-based Religious Education (Creswell, 2012).

This study utilized a case study research design in which a case of non-Christian religion learners in primary schools was used. Van Wyk (2015) defines a research design as the set of methods and procedures used in collecting and analyzing measures of the variables in the research problem. This is also the framework that has been created to find answers to the research questions. Leedy and Omrod (2014) on the other hand, define a case study as researching a particular individual, programme or event, in detail over a period of time.

A total of six learners from a non-Christian religious background were purposively sampled from a school in the Manzini region. The six purposively sampled learners were interviewed in their school settings. Thematic Content Analysis was also used to analyse the data gathered through interviews.

Results of the study

The results of the study were presented according to the themes that emerged from the study. Direct quotations from the respondents were used to substantiate the respondents' views.

Christian Religious Education classes in primary schools

Most learners stated that mostly teachers who are staunch members of the Christian faith take everything subjectively. They fail to focus on the content of the subject but end up instructing learners to believe that Christianity is the way to go, something that makes them wonder which religion should be practiced as they know that the best religion one can ever practice is the one they practice at home. Learners stated that the nature of this curriculum is not to provide learners with knowledge but it instructs them on what to believe because even the syllabus structure immerses learners deep into the doctrines of Christianity. This makes some learners to feel left out because I believe these learners have programmed their minds to understand the content taught in this subject to a certain level as they need to also leave room for their own religion. This is what learner 1 had to say when asked to state the experiences non-Christian learners encounter in Christian Religious Education classes: *We feel left out, mainly because the content currently taught immerses us deeply into the doctrines of Christianity.* Learner number 3 reveals that, *It is boring in religious education classes because the teachers who are Christians simply change the classes into preaching time where all learners have to listen to the teacher's sermon.*

Learning Christian Religious Education to non-Christian religious learners

Among other causes of the challenges faced by non-Christian learners in Christian Religious Education classes was that at most instances Christian learners dominate in everything. They dominate during discussions, tests and even participation during lessons, something that has made some of the non-Christians to feel as if this subject was never made for them or it was simply made to socialize them into Christianity. This is how Learner 3 responded to some of the questions. *We feel left out because most of the content we learn in class is something our Christian counterparts get from their churches and they tend to dominate in everything.*

Learner 4 had similar sentiments with Learner 3 on this subject. This is what the learner had to say: *We feel left out and I think this is because the content they teach now, immerses us deeply into the doctrines of Christianity. This means that the existence of us non-Christians in schools is downplayed. Some of us even appear to be absent-minded during lessons because we feel undermined and taken for granted.* Taking into consideration the views shared by the above-mentioned learners, one can safely state that education is no longer for all if it benefits others more while disadvantaging others. It is worth noting to state that all learners and parents, regardless of their religious background are stakeholders of the education system and they have a right to an education that is fair to all since taxpaying is not based on religion or race but it is mandatory for every citizen of the country. Christian learners are bound to lead in everything because the content they learn is in a religion they fully comprehend and practice.

Learners' religious backgrounds

Learners' religious backgrounds also pose as a challenge in their bid to successfully assimilate the content they learn in their classes. While gaining data from the participants, the researcher discovered that learners have

difficulties in comprehending some concepts of Christianity due to their religious affiliation. For instance, the issue of life after death is perceived different by the various religious groups. Again most learners believe that there is only one God and this God is not Jesus Christ. In Islam, Christ is perceived as a prophet just like Muhamad. This then becomes a challenge because learners take this tendency to their assessments. They stick to what they are told in their homes and religious gatherings. Teachers also stated that it is not easy to twist the mind of a child of Islam origin, yet with the others you sometimes win. To substantiate the challenges teachers face during lessons, this is what Learner 2 had to say:

Us Muslims find difficulty in believing some of the content we are taught in class because Islam has been wired to our brains such that not even a single scripture from the Bible can make us agree with, since, we have our Qu'uran which also carries its own ideologies, different from those of the Bible. To us the Qu'uran serves a similar as the Holy Bible.

On the other hand, Christian learners perceive themselves as always right and for others to be non-Christians, to them is like those people have chosen to be anti-Christ and will go to hell in their life after death. This therefore creates a litany of issues because it comes back to the view that was expressed by some non-Christian learners that government has given Christianity a status of superiority, which then reduced the other religions into cults. Some of the learners especially the Muslims are told at home not to read the Bible because it is against their religion. This makes it difficult for teachers to give these learners home works that will require them to cite a certain scripture or maybe to stage a play such as the Story of the Good Samaritan.

Most learners stated that the subject contains content that immerses them deeply into the Christian faith. Basically, it means that the content they are learning regards every learner as a Christian, something which becomes a problem to the learners as some are born of respected leaders in their different religious convictions. For instance, a child of an Imam or a traditional healer holds strong religious values of their religion and is expected to be exemplary in their community and amongst members of the same religion in terms of upholding and defending the values of their religion. When some of the learners were asked how do they find being compulsory taught Christianity in a multi-religious Swazi society, where human rights are under scrutiny, Learner 4 revealed that, *It would be better if the country is a Christian country or our schools are owned and funded by the various Christian denominations, then we would not have problems with the current arrangement.* These same sentiments were shared by learner 5 and 6.

It is therefore important to state that Christian Religious Education is taught as a compulsory subject across all grade levels both in public and private schools as a means of raising every Swazi child using Christian values as opposed to educating them about Christianity (Eswatini Christian Religious Education Syllabus, 2017).

Discussion of findings

The study revealed that learners learning Christian religious education who are from non-Christian religious background expressed that the subject content is not in line with their beliefs, thus, they feel left out. This is in line with Pruitt et.al. (2010) who express that a learner who has accumulated a specific perspective over time, finds it difficult to change. Learners from non-Christian religious background revealed that the way the current Christian religious education is taught, puts much focus and emphasis on the doctrines of Christianity. This finding is similar to that of the Cardus Education Survey (2011) which also revealed that the non-ending emphasis on faith and also teaching the same content and using the same strategies take away interests from the learners. The study revealed that in the classes there are learners from other religions who find it difficult to believe the Christianity teachings but, they are still expected to learn Christianity religious education. This is viewed as negative stereotyping by Hodgson (2010) who is against stereotyping like calling traditional healers as witch doctors as in the South African Religious Education Policy of 2003.

Conclusions

The results of the study reveal that the implementation of this directive of teaching Christian education only in schools is not going down well with many, mainly in public schools because these are schools that are owned by government and government is expected to ensure that the constitution is not violated. Again this directive did not take into consideration the diversity that exists in the Swazi society much as it is known that Swazis perform cultural practices with Christianity alongside, making Christianity the dominant religion in the country. It would

still make sense to consider the provisions of the constitution before this directive could have gone ahead. The learners from non-Christian backgrounds feel left out of the religious practices in schools.

Recommendations

The study recommends that the religious education offered in schools be reviewed and aligned with the constitution of the country since it allows multicultural activities to be applied to the country so as to cater for the needs of every learner in the country. It is a recommendation in this study that stakeholders be consulted before a policy is implemented so as to save the nation from controversy.

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