

Use of Life Themes Pedagogy and its Influence on Performance in Christian Religious Education (CRE) in Secondary Schools in Kenya

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5.1 Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the teachers' use of life themes pedagogy and its influence on performance in Christian Religious Education (CRE) in Secondary Schools in Kenya. The objectives of the study were: to find out how each of the four steps of life themes pedagogy (Human experience, Biblical Experience, Explanation & Application & Response) influence performance in CRE, and, to investigate the challenges in the use of life themes pedagogy in the implementation of CRE curriculum in Secondary schools in Kenya. The study was guided by Social Development Theory by Vygotsky, constructivist Theory by Brunner and Situated Learning Theory by Lev. The study employed descriptive survey design. The study used stratified sampling to select the schools and purposive sampling to select both students and teachers of CRE. Questionnaires, interview guide and document analysis were used for data collection. The total number of respondents was 454. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. The data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively using Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. Reliability of research instruments was checked using Cronbach's alpha which was 0.85 and above thus was reliable enough, whereas construct and content validity was checked by the teaching faculty. Data was summarized using means and standard deviation and presented using frequency tables and charts. The study revealed that teachers of CRE used life themes pedagogy and the steps had an influence on performance in spite of the challenges they faced. Some of the challenges were that the pedagogy was time consuming and the syllabus was very wide. The findings of the study are hoped to benefit Ministry of Education in designing plans that would ensure that CRE teachers are adequately prepared to embrace life themes pedagogy. In the field of education, it will add literature to what already exists as well as create gaps for further research. For the teachers of CRE the study will help them to improve their skills in the use of the pedagogy and on the need for making students' real life experiences the basis for teaching Christian Religious Education hence lead to improved performance in the subject. The study therefore concludes that use of life themes pedagogy is crucial in ensuring better performance of CRE and hence it is strongly encouraged in the teaching of the subject.

Key words: *Life Themes, Pedagogy, Teachers, Performance*

5.2 Introduction

Life approach (also referred to as life themes pedagogy) is a method of teaching and learning CRE which begins the lesson using the actual day to day experiences of the learners and moving through reflection of these experiences to a religious understanding of them (Shitoli, Kerre & Gichaga, 2008). It means starting to teach from real, concrete and present experience of learners. The approach aims at guiding the learner to see his/her experiences as a way in which God manifests Himself. The last 30 years have seen Religious Education educators trying to accommodate at least two different sets of educational concerns and techniques: the first set of concerns is an attempt to relate Religious Education to the daily experiences of mankind, and thus enabling learners to interpret and understand such experiences from a theological and a sociological perspective. As Grimmit (1982) puts it: The first set of concerns arose from insights taken from developmental psychology and child centered theories of education. These concerns were accommodated in the 1960s by defining religion in terms of a natural theology of experience with strongly Christian affinities and seeing RE as promoting among pupils an activity of theological reflection which would lead them to a Christian interpretation of human experience.

The second set of concerns cited by Grimmit (1982) arose from insights that we regained from the use of conceptual analysis and educational philosophy and from techniques deriving from the history of religions.

These concerns were accommodated in the 1970s by defining religion in terms of a form of knowledge relating to a significant aspect of human experience, and seeing Religious Education as promoting among pupils understanding of that discipline and how it is expressed in and through social phenomena (Schools Council Religious Education Committee Bulletin, 1977).

Learner-centered approaches, under which falls heuristic or discovery methods (Twoli *et al.*, 2007; Callahan & Clark; 1982; Aggarwal, 2001), are emphasized in all subjects. But given the subjectivity of religion, and therefore the subjectivity of Religious Education (Cooling, 2003), it is not possible to use learner-centred methods without giving students freedom to critically explore all versions or “truths” about an aspect of life that is being studied. Life themes is an example of learner centered approach. The teacher makes up his/her mind in advance on what students should discover, (Cox, 1983). For example, “Why should abstinence be the only method of HIV prevention that should be promoted in secondary schools?” This kind of approach has been referred to as “neo-confessionalism” because essentially, it is a new way of converting students to one’s line of thinking or beliefs (Cox, 1983). The constructivist approach allows more openness of approach to religious, moral and pedagogical issues (Maani & Kenyi, 2005; Groenwegen, 1993). In addition to effective approaches to teaching, teachers and students need up-to-date instructional materials – text books inclusive, (Clegg, 2009). However, Goldman (1965) observes that the life experience approach as a learner-centred approach makes children to integrate all they are learning and doing in all subjects within a world view of God as a creator and as the person who cares about his people. Hence, this so-called learner-centered approach remained confessional or dogmatic in both outlook and approach, and like the earlier Bible-based syllabuses, the aim of Religious Education teaching was still to lead the learner towards a confessional commitment to Christianity. According to Goldman (1965), Christianity should still be taught in the so-called learner-centered approach because it is “true” and answers the deepest needs of human nature; and without knowledge of the love of God and a relationship with Him, humankind will live impoverished. Learners should therefore be taught Christian oriented Religious Education because it primarily centers on the needs of human nature (Goldman, 1965).

5.3 Statement of the Problem

Constraints facing teachers of CRE in using life approach have been defined by (Ombuna 1998), who found out that teachers depend mostly on lecture methods which makes students to have negative attitude towards CRE and this affects its implementation. Onsongo (2002) identifies four main steps that are involved in the use of the Life themes approach or pedagogy these are: Human Experience, Biblical Experience, Explanation, as well as Application and Response. Walaba, (2008) further indicates that the area of concern in CRE which has been lacking is methodology. Teachers of CRE are expected to use the above steps in the delivery of the lesson in order enhance learners’ interaction as well as improve on the students’ attitude and performance in the subject.

There has been unsteady performance of CRE in the country and it is evident in the performance at the County level where the trends have kept down streaming. Basing on the KNEC reports of 2006 and 2007, performance in ATR contributed to the drop in performance in CRE paper one from 61.59% to 57.57% in 2006. Other KNEC reports of 2011-2015 on CRE performance have an indication of varied performance in the subject. These reports show that the overall assessment of the candidates was fair as some candidates performed very well while others performed poorly. This was attributed to poor syllabus coverage, poor approaches to teaching, lack of objectivity on the side of the teachers and inability of the candidates to apply their academic knowledge to real life situations. On the same note, previous researches have revealed that the subject’s performance has been threatened by the belief that it is a booster subject pursued by average students academically so as to boost their grades hence lacks the seriousness it deserves from both teachers and students, where they assume that it can be passed even with less input Kimosop (2008).

Pedagogies of Religious Education have been explored extensively in Britain (Grimmitt, 2000). Despite the fact that the life themes pedagogy has been used extensively in Britain, little has been done in Africa.

With the exception of studies conducted in East and Central African schools, in the 1970's, 1980's and the 1990's (Onsongo, 2002), not a single study has been done on the subject in Bungoma County. This study is of great importance to the teacher trainers who will get feedback on how effective their training programs are and it will raise more challenges to stimulate researchers to undertake similar research. More so, it is of great importance to the researcher as a teacher of CRE as she will get to know the problems hindering the use of life themes pedagogy and how it can be made effective. This provides guidance to policy makers and teachers on the need for making students' real life experiences the basis for teaching Christian Religious Education. Although the life themes pedagogy is effective in teaching CRE (Onsongo, 2002), it is not known how often CRE teachers who teach in secondary schools in Bungoma County use it.

This, therefore, necessitated a research study on the use of life themes pedagogy in the implementation of CRE. In view of this discrepancy, there was need to determine the use of life themes pedagogy and its influence on performance. If unchecked this inconsistency and lack of seriousness in the subject will jeopardize the initial purpose of teaching CRE which was inculcation of moral values which are on the verge of collapse in Kenya today (Walaba, 2008).

5.4 Steps in the Use of Life Themes Pedagogy

Shitoli, Kerre, and Gichaga (2008) outline the following steps.

i) Human Experience

In this stage, the lesson begins with the teacher involving the learners in reflecting on their day-to-day experiences related to the subject matter. Its purpose is to arouse the learners' interest, attention and to stimulate his/her imagination. This could be a scenario, questions, demonstration, interesting stories or even drama which is relevant to the lesson and to the learner's life. The teacher is expected to show how God is revealed in the experience.

ii) The Biblical Experience

The teacher introduces the relevant text from the Bible, and then guides the learners to read the references where applicable while giving appropriate explanation.

iii) Explanation

The teacher explains the main points by use of various teaching aids to make the lesson more real, lively and interesting. Methods such as discussion, question and answer, note making, lecture can be used for in-depth comprehension of knowledge of the content necessary for application and choice of values.

iv) Application and Response

At this stage, the teacher tries to show the relevance of the content to the learners' lives and assesses whether the attitudinal objective has been achieved or not. The teacher provides the learners with an opportunity to react and respond to the message of the lesson. Since life approach focuses on critical thinking, it encourages interactive and participatory learning.

v) The Learner's Activity

The teacher gives learning activities to the learners which are aimed at assisting them to assess their responses practically. Such activities include writing, singing, drawing, mimicking, role play and reciting a memory verse.

Lulley (2009) observes that the teacher is required to help or stimulate the student to reflect, analyse and synthesize information and eventually apply it to their own life. Appropriate methods used are those that enhance acquisition of values such as small group discussion and valuing methods (value clarification, self-exploratory, value sheet & group inquiry). In defending the new approach to CRE, Loukes (1965) claims that it must seek to perform some task which would be acceptable as, healthy, contributing to wholeness of personality. Their influence for change was due to research findings of Piaget and J.S Brunner –whose

findings revealed that children's thinking, developed in stages. Grimmitt (2000) argues that the findings from developmental psychology require that a developmental approach be used in teaching CRE. The approach demands that child's own experiences, needs and interest becomes the points for learning and teaching. The child's own experiences with religious concepts should result from his/her own feelings, act and experiences to express what he/ she discover in everyday language. He notes that every effort should be taken to link the children's own experiences with what they recognize to be central concepts of religion. The recent social changes have also called for changes in approach in CRE. Grimmitt notes that materialistic world outlook prevalent in the present society has cultivated a mistaken belief in power and ability of technology to solve man's problems. Grimmitt feels that young people in today's society need help in developing their own perspective to examine the claims, demands and values of the technical society.

Religious education according to Grimmitt may play an important role in helping them towards personal autonomy based on criteria awareness of alternatives. The social changes imply that teaching of CRE can no longer be approached in the same trend; there is need for life approach to the subject. Chave (1949) supports the same view and says that religious education makes use of human experiences, past and present and with the creative interaction of free minds more forwards to the solution of current issues. The changes which took place in 1960's and early 1970's led to need for life approach to teaching CRE in Britain and other countries. In Africa and Kenya, in particular the need was felt after independence. The main justification of this approach as seen by many scholars lay in the fact that religion was part and parcel of human experiences and therefore should be approached from human experience.

Grimmitt (1982) says that the main justification of life themes is based on assumption that the validity of a particular religious concept for an individual is not merely to be found in his knowledge that it is revealed in the Bible or written traditions of the church, but in his/her knowledge that what it points to or illuminates his/her own experience and situation. Religious concepts only come alive when we are able to relate them to sometimes partially and sometimes completely to our own life experience. The views expressed by Grimmitt are in line with the general principles of education which also emphasize the necessity of experience in any learning. Emphasizing the important role experience play in learning, Fowler (1990) recons that at one level are learning detached from the concrete world of every day experiences, but if it is sound, it is a deepening and extending of our knowledge of the world. Fowler goes ahead to say that marvel of childhood is powerful in the way in which children learn and assimilate knowledge through their own everyday experience. He observes that: before children attend school, they have already learnt a great deal about quantity, space, movement and speed, right and wrong belief and faith such that all schools need to do is to capitalize on children's experiment knowledge and develop it further.

Same ideas echoed by Evening (1972) assert that Jesus in his parables started from real life situation and lead on to deeper truths. He too used life approach. Talboid (1979) states that Life approach to CRE is based on the fact that pupils learn more effectively through their own experiences but not their intellect. The teaching process is to move from real life situation as they are experienced by the child in harmony with all in community. The most important justification for life approach in teaching CRE is that students understand the subject better because it will use their daily experiences. Most of the justifications are based on what foreign writers who felt urgent need for the pupils of their countries especially Britain to learn through life experiences. Kenyan educators have the same feeling as each subject is expected to use child centered approach in teaching and learning activities.

5.5 Teacher Preparedness in the Use of Life Themes Pedagogy in Teaching CRE

Teacher preparedness entails the empowerment of the teacher in terms of teaching skills as well as content so that they are able to achieve the educational goals. Such goals include inculcation of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values during the teaching learning process. Teacher preparedness refers to the professional development. Several scholars have revealed that Professional Development activities have a positive bearing on a range of aspects, including positive attitudes towards development activities (Steinert et al.,

2006); shifts of conceptions of teaching (Donnelly, 2008); enhancement in motivation in teaching (Lycke, Hoftvedt, & Holm, 1998); increased teaching self-efficacy and confidence (Donnelly, 2008; Postareff et al., 2007); higher quality of teaching practice, such as using a variety of teaching techniques, strategies, and skills (Brawner, Felder, Allen, & Brent, 2002); and positive effects on students' learning, such as students' satisfaction of learning experience (Trigwell, Caballero, Rodriguez, & Han, 2012), and positive influence on students' approaches to learning (Ho et al., 2001).

When a teacher is well trained, it also leads to psychological change; the initial psychological status of teaching also affects teachers' attitudes towards teaching development (Åkerlind, 2003). The teachers' attitude is changed from negative to positive and impacts positively on the students' outcome. For instance, Postareff et al. (2007) categorized 200 university lecturers into 4 groups according to the amount of pedagogical training they attended. They found that lecturers who received the most amount of training tended to conceive teaching as helping students restructure their knowledge (i.e., conceptual change/student-focused) and scored highest on self-efficacy in teaching. In contrast, those who had the least amount of training were more likely to view teaching as knowledge transmission (i.e., information transmission/teacher-focused) and were also low in self-efficacy. These results suggest that teachers' preparedness may affect the level of achievement of the students.

Åkerlind (2003) reported that university lecturers who conceived teaching as knowledge transmission activities believed that teaching development programs should help teachers absorb new knowledge and teaching skills; whereas those who perceived teaching as restructuring students' existing concepts saw teaching development as a useful way to facilitate student learning. These views are relevant in as much as life themes pedagogy is concerned because it is a move from the traditional transmissive methods to the constructivist classroom. While previous studies have focused on the effect of PD in teaching and learning in higher education (e.g., Ho et al., 2001; Postareff et al., 2007), whether Professional Development has significant impacts on teaching and learning in school settings is unclear.

Walaba (2008) established that C.R.E contributes to moulding the students' behaviour and that those who adopted religious teachings rarely had problems with the teachers in relation to their behaviour. Christian Religious Education (CRE) is one of the subjects in the secondary school curriculum in Kenya entrusted with the responsibility of teaching and instilling in learners moral values (KIE, 2000). These views are shared by other researchers like Ndarwa (2006) and Musya (1996). Ndarwa (2006) established that C.R.E helps students to develop morally and mold behavior. It also prepares them to become responsible citizens.

5.6 Challenges Experienced in the Use of Life Themes Pedagogy

Mwashigadi (2012) found the following reasons as to why CRE teachers don't use life themes pedagogy: Overcrowded classes which do not give learners an equal chance to participate in discussions, overburdened syllabus which makes the teacher to rush over the content and transmit knowledge by lecture, heavy loads coupled with large classes wear out teachers thus leaving them with hardly enough time to make thorough preparation of the lessons they teach. The textbooks don't follow life approach in their content, leaving the teacher with the task of coming up with suitable experiences for discussion in human experience. There is hardly enough time to go through all the four steps in life approach in 35 minutes. Onsongo (2002), Muli (2009), Nguju (2008), Ombuna (1994), and Muthoni (1992) observed similar findings. According to the research carried out by Wambui (2013) on the Constraints facing teachers of CRE in using the Life Approach in Secondary Schools in Nairobi East District in Kenya, the findings revealed that teachers face a wide range of problems while teaching using the life approach strategy. Most (42.9%) teachers felt that irrelevance, inadequacy of resources (14.3%) and (21.4%) teaching sensitive issues were more challenging. More studies have been conducted on the teaching of Christian Religious Education in schools. Wainaina (1984) conducted a research on the problems facing teachers in implementing the new Christian Religious Education syllabus in primary schools in Thika Municipality. The research showed that teachers found it difficult to use the recommended approaches due to lack of time, heavy teaching loads, poor professional guidance and supervision in the subject. Wainaina's findings were confirmed by a similar study conducted

by Malusu (1985) in primary schools in Nairobi province. Mutoro (1985) in his study on problems children may have in understanding CRE in primary schools found out that children had problems due to a number of factors. They come from different religious backgrounds (denominations). Most learners lacked direct experience of what formed the bulk content of CRE. Most teachers lacked skills of interpreting or providing the direct experiences themselves. He recommended in service for teachers in interpreting suitable Biblical teaching materials. Onsongo (2002) in her research in secondary schools in Nairobi found out that, most teachers were not using life approach. They followed the syllabus and content of the text book word by word. Mwashigadi (2012) concluded that Life approach strategy was not being implemented effectively by the teachers of CRE in the selected schools in Voi. This was evident because most teachers did not include the five steps of life approach strategy in their CRE lessons. She suggested that the same research can be carried out in institutions of higher learning to determine how trainees are prepared for life approach. This is in agreement with Kimosop (2008), who also established that teachers never used life approach methodology as a method required in the teaching of C.R.E and lacked the structure to be followed in its teaching, teachers of C.R.E should use participatory and learner centered methods where all learners are involved in the learning process. The above literature reveals that much has been done in CRE in general but little has been done on the teacher's use of life approach in teaching CRE in particular as such the need for this study. Similarly, a study by Kyndt, Dochy, Struyven, and Cascallar (2011, p. 147) showed that a workload that was neither too much nor too little, but rather "high enough" or at an appropriate level of "workload and task complexity," promoted the deep learning approach.

5.7 Research Methodology

The study employed a descriptive research survey design. Descriptive survey research design was fit in this study because it describes records and analyses situations in attempt to investigate the teachers' use of life themes pedagogy and how it influences performance in secondary schools in Bungoma County. The study utilized stratified sampling to select the schools and purposive sampling techniques to select the teachers of CRE and the form three students of CRE in Secondary schools in Bungoma County. The county had a total of 857 teachers of CRE and 19,772 form three CRE students. 29 teachers were sampled as well as 425 students based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table of sample size determination and Stat Trek (2012) formula. Three research instruments, namely questionnaire, interview guide and document analyses were used for the data collection.

5.8 Findings and Discussion

5.8.1 Teacher Preparedness in the Use of Life Themes Pedagogy

Table 5.1 shows response on teachers' preparedness in the use of life themes pedagogy in the implementation of CRE curriculum. When asked on the intention of the workshops, the responses were that those who did not give a response were 11(38%), other responses were "equip us with teaching skills", 3(10%), "examination tips", 3(10%), "improve on teaching skills", 3(10%), "capacity building", 2(7%), "boost morale and performance", 1(3%), "create awareness on world dynamism", 1(3%), "how to integrate methods of learning", 1(3%), "improve on content delivery", 1(3%), "improve on CRE performance", 1(3%), "improve on curriculum implementation", 1(3%), "updates on teaching methodology, exam tips", 1(3%).

Table 5.1: Teacher preparedness

	Frequency	Percentage
Did these assessments create an impact on your classroom practices?	29	100.00 %
No	2	7.00 %
Yes	27	93.00 %

<i>Have you attended any workshop, seminar or in-service for C.R.E?</i>	29	100.00 %
No	11	38.00 %
Yes	18	62.00 %
Last assessment on curriculum delivery of CRE by DQASO	29	100.00 %
Between 1-3 years ago	10	34.00 %
Less than 1 year ago	16	55.00 %
No assessment done	3	11.00 %
Regular preparation of lessons	29	100.00 %
Yes	29	100.00 %

5.8.2 Student Opinion Regarding Use of Life Themes

The most agreed to by virtue of the mean were Biblical experience plays a major part during delivery of content. The lesson is delivered in a manner that explanation is also emphasized (4.52), human experience forms an important part whenever CRE is taught in class (4.48) and application and response is always applied by CRE teacher as a means to get feedback from students (4.15).

Table 5.2: Student opinion regarding use of life themes

Statements	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	CV
Application and response is always applied by CRE teacher as a means to get feedback from students	4.15	1.1283	27.19 %
Biblical experience plays a major part during delivery of content	4.60	0.7168	15.58 %
Human experience forms an important part whenever CRE is taught in class	4.48	0.7941	17.73 %
The lesson is delivered in such a way that explanation is also emphasized from the start	4.52	0.8500	18.81 %

On the other hand the variations in terms of coefficient of variation(CV) in descending order was Application and response is always applied by CRE teacher as a means to get feedback from students (27.19%), The lesson is delivered in a manner that explanation is also emphasized from the start (18.81%), Human experience forms an important part whenever CRE is taught in class (17.73%) and Biblical experience plays a major part during delivery of content (15.58%) meaning the most varied opinion were with the fact that application and response was always applied by CRE teacher as a means to get feedback

from students (27.19%), while less varied opinion were Biblical experience plays a major part during delivery of content (15.58%) as shown in table 4.2.

5.8.3 Challenges in the Use of Life Themes Pedagogy

The study by Lulley (2009) revealed that though African traditional religion (ATR) content was taught in all schools, the teachers encountered various challenges which included lack of in servicing, over dependence on transmissive methods of teaching coupled with inadequate teaching and learning material. However from current study the challenges encountered by teachers in the use of life themes pedagogy include the fact that it is time consuming 6(1.41%), others don't understand 3(0.71%). Moreover some teachers have fear that they may offend the students touched negatively 2(0.47%). others contend that students have different life styles 2(0.47%) and others observed that students may just take the topic casually 2(0.47%).

Table 5.3 Challenges in the use of life themes pedagogy

	Frequency	Percentage
Life theme pedagogy is time consuming.	6	41.00 %
Teachers don't understand the concept of life themes pedagogy	3	71.00 %
Fear of offending students when using life theme pedagogy	2	47.00 %
Students individual difference and life styles	2	47.00 %
Students may not take learning seriously when using life themes pedagogy	2	47.00 %

5.9 Conclusions and Recommendations

The study focused on the following objectives: to find out how each of the four of life themes pedagogy(Human experience, Biblical Experience, Explanation & Application & Response) influence performance of CRE in secondary schools in Bungoma county and to investigate the challenges in the use of life themes pedagogy in the implementation of CRE curriculum. Descriptive statistics that were used to answer the objectives included frequency tables, charts and measures of central tendency as well as measures of dispersion.

From the study it can be concluded that Teacher preparedness is a crucial aspect that cannot be overlooked in order to realize success in implementation of the CRE curriculum. It can also be concluded that every step of life themes pedagogy i.e. Human experience, Biblical Experience, Explanation and Application and Response has a role to play in terms of performance of the subject and each of them uniquely affects performance and so it is important for the teachers of CRE to ensure every aspect is followed keenly to realize overall success. Finally some of the key areas of concern that need to be addressed is to encourage teachers to use life themes in teaching CRE as well as urge students to embrace this methodology of learning despite the challenges associated with it. The study strongly recommends the following: CRE teachers to use life themes pedagogy as it is proven to have an influence on performance, CRE teachers to ensure they attend workshops, seminars or in-service to enhance preparedness and allocation of more teaching learning resources.

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