

ASSESSING THE MULTI FAITH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CURRICULUM IN BOTSWANA PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed at exploring the views of teachers on ways in which Religious Education is assessed and reasons why students' performance is going down over the years in Religious Education. The study further explores how assessment could be used to enhance the teaching and learning of Religious Education and the challenges entailed. Data were collected through interviews and analysis of documents and the sample was made up of five Religious Education teachers in a junior secondary school in a semi-urban setting. The findings indicated that teachers experienced challenges in the assessment of the multi faith Religious Education syllabus in terms of lack of assessment skills such as producing high quality type of assessment items.

Keywords: Religious education, multi-faith curriculum, assessment skills, secondary schools, essays, multiple choice items

INTRODUCTION

In Botswana just like elsewhere, the teachers' and learners' performance in schools is measured through various forms of assessment. The success of educational institutions is mainly measured by the academic performance of their students. Religious Education is a subject that is taught at various levels in Botswana schools. At primary school level it is referred to as Religious and Moral Education which is a combination of religion and morality while at secondary school level it is called Religious Education and offered as an optional subject.

The inclusion of Religious Education into the curriculum dates back to the time when the missionaries came to Africa. The Europeans brought with them education which was mostly bible instruction which was confessional in nature and the syllabus was bible knowledge (Tlou & Campbell 1992) and was solely Christian since there was no room for other religions. After independence in 1966 it was no longer popular because the emphasis was on job creating skills subjects of which RE was viewed as lacking. However, it made a comeback in the early 1970s with the introduction of *Developing in Christ* (1981) syllabus and *Christian Living Today* (1981) at junior and senior secondary school levels respectively. For a long time until 1996, it still remained Bible Knowledge at primary school level. However, all types of education in religion were referred to as RE and all the three schooling levels (primary, junior and senior) emphasised Christianity. The Christian based-RE was performed well by students at all the levels. In 1996 the RE curriculum at primary and junior secondary school levels changed from a single-religion to multi-faith one as way of encompassing the pluralistic nature of the society of Botswana due to the influence of several studies done in Botswana and elsewhere (Dinama, 1993, Mmolai, 1990, Morake, 1993, Seretse, 1990) and was followed by the senior secondary in 2005. However, the multi-faith RE had no mention of religions that were to form the content due to its theme-based approach yet the available and prescribed textbooks stressed Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism and Buddhism. The curriculum also included contemporary emerging issues such

as HIV and AIDS and environmental sustainability. The junior secondary curriculum was reviewed in 2008 (Botswana Government, 2008) and there was a deliberate decision to identify the religions that were to be studied because an interpretive approach was adopted which demanded that religions to be studied be specified. The other main reason for the move was that it was difficult to assess RE that was open in content and did not isolate certain religions for study. Generally, the multi-faith curriculum further ensured that learners be exposed and sensitized to different religions of the world as a way of instilling a sense of tolerance as well as contributing to inter-faith awareness and understanding.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since the introduction of a multi faith curriculum in 1996 there was a general decline in the pass rate in Botswana junior secondary schools. One of the reasons for the declining results is the teachers' lack of assessment skills in Religious Education. Presently, students tend to perform well in continuous assessment at individual school level and poorly in national examinations. In addition, there is the suspicion that students might be having a negative attitude towards the subject and not taking it seriously hence their poor performance. There is also a shortage of resources and that could further contribute to poor performance. The available textbooks do not offer adequate information and are in most instances full of errors leading teachers to use wrong information.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What forms of assessment are used in religious education?
2. What are the challenges faced by multi faith religious education teachers in assessing religious education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Assessment

Assessment may be understood differently by various people, for example, Farrant (1980) views assessment as the process by which the quality of performance of a learner's work is judged while Goodwin (1997) says that it entails how a body of knowledge, and abilities are measured. This measurement entails collecting, synthesizing and interpreting information to aid in decision making in teaching and learning (Airasian, 1997). It also aids in decision-making in relation to fostering improving teaching and providing information about what has been done in the teaching and learning process. Assessment provides important feedback for students and teachers as well as information about the education system in general (McMillan 2001).

Effective assessment assists in the teaching and learning process as it enables teachers to reflect on what they value and hence help in making further instructional decisions in terms of making adjustments to their teaching (Nisbet 1993, Swaffield, 2008, Wright & Brandon, 2000). Teachers' assessment competencies are likely to determine the quality of education that a country offers and is through how teachers administer the various forms of assessment to ensure mastery of knowledge and skills acquired. Assessment can be both formative and summative in terms of the one carried out during the course of instruction process and against the one done to measure learning outcomes achieved, for example, in terms of tests and examinations. In many instances, assessment serves as a vehicle for improving the quality of learning (Atkin, Black& Coffey 2000) though it is a complex process that involves the

motivation and self-esteem of the learners. Furthermore, assessment needs to be aligned with teachers' beliefs about learning as well as the value they place on it (Swaffield, 2008). For example, RE classes in Botswana are mainly teacher-centred and little of students' contribution is allowed (Lumadi & Awino, 2009) hence this has an impact on how teachers assess and how students respond to those tasks. However, the learners' understanding and knowledge in relation to the instruction can be determined through assessment (Banks, 2005; Goodwin 1997; Tileston, 2004). For assessment to be effective certain standards need to be developed and they should be met by teachers who are constantly involved in assessment.

Assessment in Religious Education

Religious Education assessment procedures include objective tests such as short and structured questions and essay writing all of these are supposed to enhance the instructional process in terms of offering guidance on the type of remedial action that may be done. Assessment has challenges and especially in Religious Education (Wright & Brandon, 2000) which is naturally a low consensus area and religion which is contestable due to its controversial nature. In addition, Religious Education of a multi-faith content takes cognisance of diversity in schools (Everington, Avest, Bakker, & Van der Want, 2011) something that teachers have to bear in mind as they administer various types of assessment. These challenges are compounded by teachers' lack of skills on assessment and lack of content knowledge of the subject (Goodwin 1997). According to Nisbet (1993) assessment mainly influences how pupils learn and how teachers teach, for example, students may be taught for test and encouraged to cram and memorise information instead of internalising it.

One of the challenges is on scoring of essays which are based on students' ability to express themselves as a way of showing understanding. However, Farrant (1980) asserts that teachers set essay questions with the belief that they can be assessed objectively which is not necessarily the case since marking of essay questions is challenging because it entails lots of personal bias. Ogunnyi (1986) notes that scoring of essays is unreliable since it depends on the examiner's state of mind and impression hence making them to be highly subjective and inconsistent. An examiner's emphasis may be on students' literacy skills, hand writing, neatness, spelling and grammar which may bring about bias in grading essay questions (Ogunnyi, 1986).

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study adopted a qualitative methodology which expects the researcher to solicit in depth description of issues in order to better understand a particular phenomenon in its natural setting and where the researcher could learn from the experience of the participants (Anderson, 2001, Delamont, 2002, Lodico, Spandling & Voegtler, 2006). In this study, the teachers' experiences, perspectives and insights were studied in a context and value system with which they occur - the classroom. Furthermore, this methodology makes the assumption that interpretation of realities is different (Hatch, 2002). In this study the qualitative methodology gave a better understanding of teachers regarding the challenges of assessing multi faith religious education curriculum in secondary schools. The methodology allowed a deep examination of the teachers' assessment skills and the type of assessment used at both school and national levels. It drew from the teachers' narratives regarding how they assess Religious Education. The participants were fully informed about the purpose of this research, the method to be used and the intended purpose of the research. This process is necessary in research since informed consent is a very important aspect of research ethics (Mills, 2003). The study employed interviews, observations and analysis of documents in order to establish

trustworthiness of data and also bearing in mind that one method had to compensate for any possible weakness of another (Hatch, 2002, Mills, 2003).

Target Population and Data Collection Instruments

The participants were five Religious Education teachers who had several years teaching RE hence viewed as information rich were from a junior secondary school in a sub-urban area. The participants were interviewed for about 40 minutes on three occasions in order to establish the trustworthiness of the data in terms of consistency. Through observations the researcher was able to see what was happening in classrooms regarding assessment by observing behaviour of teachers and students reactions as they responded. Classroom observations were aimed at corroborating the information about what teachers said in the interviews.

Documents provided data that could not be influenced by either the researcher or the participants. Various assessment documents such as textbooks, national examination papers, school-based examinations, tests and quizzes were used as a way of further enabling the researcher to get a clear picture of assessment in secondary school RE classrooms. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) note that documents are social products that are located in particular contexts and in this study it was the school hence they needed to be understood and interpreted within that environment. Documents are easy to obtain while offering a stable, rich source of data (Hartas, 2010) and in this study they were read and understood as part of the school social practices that informed and structured the decision of what the researcher needed. According to Hatch (2002), documents help in clarifying on issues that might have been missed in the observations and interviews especially since they are always there even before a researcher visits a site and engages in a study.

Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to follow up participants for clarity as well as expanding on their responses (Hatch, 2002; Slavin, 1984). Furthermore, they provided the researcher with the opportunity to explore the challenges that religious education teachers face in their assessment of the multi-faith Religious Education curriculum. As Hartas (2010) notes interviews allow an exploration of issues whereby the feelings of both the researcher and the participants are known.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Difficulties Encountered In Assessing the Multi Faith RE Curriculum

Teachers use different modes of assessment in RE and these are class exercises, homework, group work, presentations, quizzes, tests and examinations that are made up of multiple choice items and essay questions. All these modes of assessment help to assess the topics done and the objectives covered. Quizzes and homework are given during the lesson and followed by end of month tests, and eventually end of term and year examinations. For example, one of the teachers Mr Keke said:

Group work and presentations save time for me as I give students a topic to look at followed by a presentation of their findings in class. Such tasks help students to easily grasp concepts well when they themselves get involved.

However, there are several challenges that teachers faced as articulated by Ms Ndivo.

We have problems with constructing questions for mixed ability students. Multiple choice questions are difficult to construct because there are times when we repeat the same questions. Again, there is a lot that has to be covered within a short time.

Ms Pheko shared the same sentiments with Ms Ndivo adding that:

Essay questions are a problem since they are difficult to set. We end up setting the same questions over and over again. At times, one turns a short answer question into an essay question. We do what we are comfortable with in order to save ourselves from embarrassment. Another challenge is how to mark essay questions since we hardly know what to look for in students' work.

The RE teachers complained about the challenges they encountered in the assessment of the multi faith RE curriculum. Teachers expressed their disappointment on the performance of students in RE and especially at national level. For example, Ms Bantu complained that the new syllabus requires that they ask questions which are specific to religions and this is not fair to students since she believed that students should be allowed to choose religions for themselves as it was in the old syllabus. She gave an example of a question that was set and was specific to a religion: "*Briefly discuss the ethical codes in Islam*" and according to her it was an unfair question.

There has always been a trend at both school and national level regarding assessment whereby questions were based on specific religions something that the curriculum did not require but where examiners were blindly following what was in the prescribed textbooks. The problem is further compounded by the examiners' preference of certain religions that they have knowledge of and feel comfortable to teach. This was expressed by Ms Pheko when she said:

Even us teachers when setting questions we are at times biased because we set questions from religions that we have knowledge of and when students bring in information from religions that are not known to us we mark them down.

Ms Pheko indicated that the prescribed books do not offer enough information because they are confined to specific syllabus objectives. Furthermore, teachers noted that there are a few copies of the prescribed text which students are forced to share and that does not give individual students time to read at their own time and pace. Teachers also acknowledged that they hardly read beyond the students' prescribed textbooks hence they possessed inadequate content knowledge.

Mr Saka made a similar observation that lack of adequate assessment skills leads to poor performance in RE. He further noted:

At school level we set sub-standard questions that are not challenging and we also tend to be unnecessarily lenient when marking students' work.

He also observed that the questions that teachers asked are of poor quality with a lot of grammatical errors showing clearly that the teachers lack assessment skills and that they do not take assessment seriously. Teachers were in agreement that there was a huge difference between the school-based examinations and the ones set at national level and that is why there is incongruence between school assessment and the national examination.

Teachers felt that the content of religions is too much for the students to grasp since the concepts they deal with are too many to internalise. When browsing through the students' workbooks I observed that some of the tasks administered by teachers were not marked and for those that were marked there were no comments attached to help students correct their mistakes, neither was this followed by class discussion on the tasks. Teachers tended to give assessment tasks just to satisfy general school requirements but not as necessary pedagogical tools that could act as remedial instruments to enhance both teaching and students' performance. Teachers were unable to set high-order questions and when students met such

questions at national level they performed poorly since they would have been used low-order questions.

Tests, quizzes and school-based examination bore witness to what teachers said. Test documents revealed that teachers have problem in setting tests and quizzes. Most assessment tasks were poorly constructed and based on recall as shown in the two samples of quiz questions below.

- a. *Mention one significance of rites of passage.*
- b. *Which is an example of a symbol used in Buddhism?*
- c. *List the four stages of human development.*

In addition, the problem in setting multiple choice items was evident as shown in the repetition of questions for example, in one test there were two similar test items and the key which was **(b)** in both instances as shown below.

Which is an example of a symbol used in Buddhism?

- A. Calligraphy
- B. The lotus flower **[key]**
- C. Crescent moon and star
- D. Khanda

Which religion uses the lotus flower as a symbol?

- A. Christianity
- B. Buddhism **[key]**
- C. Sikhism
- D. Hinduism

Essay questions too were not well-thought out either as shown in the item below.

Discuss any four benefits of being a religious person? (10 marks)

The question carried ten marks and it is difficult to tell how the examiner arrived at the 10 marks while the question demanded *four* aspects. Marks did not tally with the expectations of the question especially since *four* is not a factor of ten from a mathematical viewpoint. Such questions are difficult to answer as well as to mark if they are not correctly formulated and especially if there is no marking scheme to guide the examiner.

CONCLUSION

Religious Education teachers have challenges in the assessment of the multi-faith Religious Education curriculum mainly because there is a lot of content to be covered in religions over a short period of time. Resources are limited and that is one of the main reasons why papers produced at school level are of low quality as they are mainly of a low cognitive level. The only available resource that could help in the teaching and assessment of Religious Education are the students' textbooks. It seems that teachers do not take assessment to be an important aspect in education compared to their view of classroom instruction and are reluctant to devise assessment tasks. They do not make an effort to go out to look for information elsewhere beyond the textbooks like the internet and field-trips. The quality of papers produced and the performance of the students based on the documents observed revealed inadequate teachers' assessment skills.

Teachers have limited skills in constructing both essays, and multiple choice items hence this waters down even a robust curriculum if assessment instruments are inaccurate because they fail to reflect what learners are really capable of doing. It is clear that teachers of RE do not have internalised skills that they can use to prepare students for national examinations. Lastly, due to the teachers' grammatical errors when writing assessment items students end up missing what the tasks demand of them hence leading to their poor performance.

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