



The Life Approach Method in Teaching Christian Religious Education in Secondary Schools

*Jane K. Onsongo**

Abstract

This study set out to investigate the extent to which teachers of Christian Religious Education (CRE) used the life approach in the teaching of the subject in secondary schools in Nairobi. Also, it was designed to find out whether these teachers were academically and professionally prepared to use the life approach in teaching the subject in secondary schools and whether they encountered any problems in the use of the life approach. Further, the study hoped to come up with suggestions on how the use of the life approach in the teaching of CRE in the secondary schools could be improved.

Data was collected from 61 teachers of CRE from 30 selected secondary schools in Nairobi using questionnaires and observation of CRE lessons in Forms III and IV.

The study found out that the teachers were not adequate professionally to use the life approach in terms of pre-service training. As a result the teachers used the life approach only to a limited extent in teaching CRE. It was also found out that the teachers encountered a number of problems in their attempts to use the life approach. These problems included shortage of time, a wide syllabus and inadequate guidance on how to use the approach. Some suggestions were given on how the use of the life approach can be improved and recommendations made to the Ministry of Education and its various arms for consideration.

Introduction

The teaching of Christian Religious Education in Kenya has undergone tremendous changes over the years. The subject traces its origins to the coming of the European missionaries who taught it in order to gain Christian converts. The missionary approach to the subject was confessional, that is, it was aimed at converting children to Christianity. The syllabus required a careful textual study of the Bible from which the students were required to relate what they studied to contemporary life.

Origin and Meaning of the Life Approach

The Life Approach has a long history, especially in the teaching of catechism in the Catholic Church. It was developed between the 1950s and 1960s, particularly through catechetical congresses held in Bangkok, Thailand in 1962; Katigondo, Uganda in 1964; Manila, Philippines in 1967; and Medellin, Colombia in 1968. The main aim of adopting this approach in the teaching of catechism was to incarnate the word of God into the culture or cultures of the people. That is, to make the human situation and peoples' experiences the centre of catechism teaching (Muthoni 1992).

In education, the Life Approach has its origins in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Jean Holm (1975), this period was characterised by two revolutions within a decade which necessitated changes in the approaches to religious education. The first revolution took place in the 1960s as a response to research findings by educational psychologists like Jean Piaget. The findings emphasised the importance of experience in the learning process. Thus, child-centred learning was contrasted with subject-centred learning.

The second revolution took place in the early seventies when, under the influence of philosophy of education, every subject in the curriculum was to be justified only on the grounds that it contributed significantly to the child's general education. These revolutions led to a different criteria for the choice of themes for study in religious education, and the way in which they were to be handled in the classroom. The aims were to change from the traditional ones of converting children to Christianity to more educational ones.

Background to the Problem

After independence, attempts were made to make education relevant to the needs of the Kenyan society. Various educational commissions were appointed to survey the existing educational resources, curriculum, and methodology, and advise the government accordingly. The Ominde Commission of 1964 and the Education Act of 1968 both emphasised the importance of teaching Christian Religious Education in schools under the guidance of various churches which sponsored schools.

In respect to the teaching of Christian Religious Education in schools, a joint church panel was set up in 1968 to work on a syllabus which could be more relevant to the Kenyan situation. A committee of Catholics and Protestants from Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia under the title "Rubaga Workshop", prepared syllabus 223 "Christian Living Today" in 1970. The special aim of the syllabus was to enable the student to grow towards responsible Christian maturity. This syllabus emphasised life-related themes. The second Christian Religious Education Panel met in 1980 to review the syllabus developed after independence. They reviewed all the syllabi from

primary and secondary schools, teacher training colleges, up to university. Commenting on the aims and objectives of syllabi, the panel noted that:

- (i) The aims and objectives of the Christian Religious Education syllabi were either Biblical or Christian-centred.
- (ii) The aims and objectives of the syllabus pointed towards the confessional aspects of CRE.
- (iii) The syllabi had therefore, through their aims and objectives, pre-determined what the learner should come out with, leaving him/her very little choice.

The comments show that the syllabi for Christian Religious Education developed after independence needed some review to make them learner-centred. The panel recommended that a new syllabus was needed for forms 1 and 2, which moved away from "Bible Themes" to Bible studies and "Life Themes" as was the case in forms 5 and 6. (Syllabus Review Report 1980). During this period (before the introduction of the 8-4-4 system), the Life Approach method was emphasised in the teaching of Christian Religious Education in primary schools, and in the secondary schools in the 223 syllabus taught in form five and six.

The recommendations of the syllabus review panel of 1980 were still being worked on when the Kenyan Government decided to overhaul the entire educational system and restructure it to meet the long-term national needs of the country. It adopted the 8-4-4 system to replace the former. The new system of education emphasised practical and technical education. In regard to Christian Religious Education, the emphasis was now placed on the Life Approach.

The Meaning of the Life Approach

Loukes (1965) defines the Life Approach as starting to teach with the real and concrete and the present situation of the learners, and letting them arrive at a religious understanding of those experiences.

Muthoni (1992) defines it as the approach which emphasises the human person as the receiver of God's self-revelation to humanity. The approach insists that God speaks to people through their situations and experiences. From these two definitions it is clear that the Life Approach essentially emphasised the use of the learners' day-to-day experiences as the basis of teaching Christian Religious Education.

Reasons why the Life Approach is Preferred

The Life Approach method has been justified on various grounds. Its chief

advocates in education - Harold Loukes, Ronald Goldman and Michael Grimmit, saw it as an attempt to correct the body-of-knowledge emphasis of the Biblical syllabi existing in Britain during their time. Some of the reasons why the approach is preferred include the following:

- i. Religious beliefs cannot be taught as if they were facts, but they are by nature experiential, Grimmit (1973).
- ii. The presence of religious education in the school curriculum must be justified on educational grounds. This means a shift from the traditional faith-fostering role to a more life-centred education, Loukes (1961).
- iii. Findings from developmental psychology pre-suppose a developmental approach in all teaching. This calls for emphasis on the child's own experiences, needs and interests. In religious education, therefore, there is need to encourage the learners to look more deeply into their feelings, acts, and experiences, and to express what they discover in everyday language.
- iv. The pluralistic and materialistic nature of the present-society cannot allow for the use of traditional methods of teaching religion. To some extent, religion has become a private affair, so the approach in teaching it should be one that can help the learner to make his/her own free choice.
- v. The most important justification for the Life Approach is that Jesus Christ, the great teacher, used the approach.

Generally speaking, the approach has been preferred to old methods because it involves the learner in the learning process and enables him/her to relate the Gospel message to his/her own life.

The Main Steps followed in the Use of the Life Approach

The primary Christian Religious Education lesson plan format as outlined in the book *No one Taught Like This Man* (1979:219), has the following steps which a teacher using the Life Approach may follow:

(a) Introduction

At this stage the teacher involves the learners in reflecting on their day to day experiences related to the subject matter. This arouses the their interest in the content that follows.

(b) Lesson Development

There are four stages in lesson development.

(i) Human Experience

This stage involves starting by presenting or discussing an event or experience in the life of the learners. The teacher tries to show how God is revealed in the experience.

(ii) The Biblical Experience

The teacher introduces the relevant text from the Bible, or the religious story which will throw light on the theme of the lesson.

(iii) Explanation

The teacher explains the main points by use of various teaching aids to make the lesson more real, lively and interesting.

(iv) Application and Response

The teacher tries to show the relevance of the content to the learners' lives. The teacher provides the learners with an opportunity to react and respond to the message of the lesson.

Those are ideally the steps that should be followed in the use of the Life Approach in the teaching of CRE; that is, start from the current situation in which the learners find themselves in, then lead them through the religious experience.

Literature Review

There is a lot of literature on approaches to religious education, especially in Britain. However, such literature is lacking in Kenya. Foreign literature was reviewed to provide a theoretical framework for the study.

The Life Approach to religious education was given impetus by a research conducted by Goldman in 1964 in Britain using a sample of two hundred pupils aged between 6 and 17 years. The purpose of the study was to find out whether there are any sequences in which levels of understanding progress in religious thinking using Jean Piaget's developmental stages. The findings of the research revealed that the religious thinking of pupils developed in stages. Goldman concluded that there was a tendency to transmit "too much too soon" in the teaching of Christian Religious Education. Goldman recommended the use of life themes, which he defined as teaching by making use of themes based upon the real life experience of the children.

Loukes (1965) noticed that success in other subjects has been achieved by starting with the learners experiences, and argued that the same success can be achieved in Christian Religious Education if the same approach is used. Justifying the use of the Life Approach, Grimmit (1973:52) writes: "Religious concepts 'only come alive' when we are able to relate them sometimes partially, sometimes completely to our life experience."

In Kenya, a number of studies have been conducted on the teaching of Christian Religious Education in schools. Wainanina (1984) conducted a research on the problems facing teachers in implementing the new Christian Religious Education syllabus in primary schools in Thika Municipality. Research revealed that the area of methodology stood out as a major source of difficulty in the implementation of the new syllabus. 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. Wainanina's findings were confirmed by a similar study conducted by Malusu (1985) in primary schools in Nairobi Province. Otiende (1982) evaluated Christian Religious Education syllabi for forms 1 to 4. He observed that syllabi for form 1 and 2 were confessional in approach and their content was abstract, divorced from the children's immediate surroundings and without reference to the traditional African Religion. For form 3 and 4 had a broader content but were founded on a Bible-centred approach which prevented students from gaining insights into the nature of their society.

From the review of the related literature in the field of Christian Religious Education, it was clear that no comprehensive study had been done on the use of the Life Approach in the teaching of the subject. It was hoped that the study would go a long way in filling this gap of knowledge.

Methodology

A stratified random sample was used in the study. 30 secondary schools were selected. They were categorised into strata: boys only, girls only, and mixed schools. For consistency purposes, 15 public and 15 private schools were chosen. 5 schools were chosen from each strata of private and public schools. All the teachers of Christian Religious Education in the selected schools were asked to fill in a questionnaire. For lesson observation purposes, 13 schools were used.

Form 3 and 4 were used for observation because the students were assumed to be mature and could therefore discuss freely their daily experiences with their teachers hence, making the use of the Life Approach easy.

The research instruments used were questionnaires and observation. The

questionnaire, which contained both closed and open-ended questions sought information on academic and professional qualification of the respondents, the use of the Life Approach, and problems encountered in the attempt to use the approach. Observation of Christian Religious Education lessons in form 3 and 4 was done to obtain information on the use of the Life Approach.

A total of 61 teachers responded to the questionnaire, and 13 were observed teaching CRE lessons in form 3 and 4. The data obtained was analysed manually using descriptive statistics.

Results

The findings of the study were as follows:

1:5:1. Academic and Professional Qualifications of the Respondents

The Christian Religious Education teachers under study were found to be both academically and professionally qualified, as 69% had attained university education or its equivalent and only 29% had attained the Kenya Advanced Certificate of Education (KACE). 80% of the teachers were professionally trained, and only 20% were untrained. Most of these teachers (70%) had taught CRE for more than five years. Teachers were asked whether they had been trained to use the Life Approach in their pre-service training or in-service training: It was found that 54% had been trained to use the approach in their pre-service training, but the time devoted to its use was inadequate. Majority of the teachers (85%) had not attended any in-service training even after the introduction of new syllabi in 1985. These findings indicate that, much as the teacher may be academically qualified, lack of regular professional updating can adversely affect the use of new approaches to teaching.

1:5:2. The Use of the Life Approach in the Teaching of CRE

It was found that most teachers (80%) did not use the Life Approach. Majority were found to be following the syllabus and content in the textbook word for word. They made very few attempts to discuss the students' day-to-day experiences in presenting the subject matter. The teacher-centred, subject-centred, and Bible-centred approaches were found to be dominating most of the teaching.

Teachers were found to be using methods which involve minimal student participation. Such methods as the lecture method, question and answer, and teacher-directed class discussions were the most used; while demonstrations, drama, role-play, field trips and social action projects which

could make students experience what they learned in class were the least used. Students' activities were found to be limited to note writing.

1:5:3. Teaching Learning Resources Available for Teaching CRE in Secondary Schools

Resources are very important to any learning situation. Some of the resources being investigated were textbooks (Bibles, reference books, teachers' guides, students' textbooks), audio-visual aids (radio, video, pictures, maps, globes, posters, charts, film-strips, magazines, slides), and community resources (resource persons, places). Majority of the teachers (74%) felt that their schools did not have adequate resources. This was confirmed by the classroom observation checklist. Where it was observed that apart from recommended CRE textbooks and the Bible, no other resources existed for use in teaching CRE. Even the textbooks were, in some cases only for the teachers, while students did not have their own copies. Students therefore relied on what the teacher had to say and give in the form of notes.

1:5:4. Problems Encountered in the Use of the Life Approach.

It was found that majority of the teachers (84%) experienced problems in the teaching of CRE, which may affect their use of the Life Approach. Some of the problems encountered included inadequate time, a negative attitude to CRE by the students, lack of enough professional guidance on how to use the Life Approach, a wide syllabus, and inadequate teaching-learning resources.

1:5:5. Suggestions on How the Use of the Life Approach can be Improved.

The respondents were asked to give suggestions on how the Life Approach could be effectively used in the teaching of CRE. The following suggestions were made:

- i. Involving students in discussions, field trips and social action projects in order to increase their experiences in various topics.
- ii. The syllabus needs shortening to make it manageable.
- iii. The recommended textbooks should present their content using the Life Approach
- iv. The examination system should emphasise the Life Approach.
- v. Involving CRE teachers in syllabus evaluation.
- vi. There should be pre-service and in-service training on how to use the

Life Approach to teach CRE.

1:6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The following were some of the conclusions arrived at by the researcher:

- i. That the CRE teachers under study had not been adequately prepared to use the Life Approach in the teaching of the subject.
- ii. That the teachers lacked adequate teaching-learning resources to support their teaching of CRE.
- iii. That the Life Approach was being used only to a limited extent.

The researcher recommended that the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) should consider revising the current CRE syllabus to make it more manageable and more life-centred in approach. It should also organise - in conjunction with the inspectorate in-service courses, seminars and workshops to guide teachers on how to implement the new syllabus using the Life Approach. The inspectorate, through its field officers, should intensify supervision in secondary schools so as to guide teachers on the need to vary their approaches to CRE to fit the needs and levels of the learners. Finally, the curriculum developers and book authors need to update the main CRE textbooks to make them more life-centred in approach.

* Jane Kerubo Onsongo is a lecturer in the Department of Education, the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. Her major research interests are gender issues in education, methods of teaching Social Education and Ethics, Christian Religious Education, and Educational Administration and Management.

Correspondence

Jane Kerubo Ombuna
Lecturer, Department of Education
Catholic University of Eastern Africa
P O Box 62157
Nairobi, Kenya
Fax 891084, Email: research@cuea.edu

References

1. Grimmit, M. (1973), *What can I do in Religious Education?: A Guide to New Approaches*, London: Mayhaw-MacCrimmon.
2. Goldman, R. (1964), *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence*, London: Routledge and Kogan Paul.

3. Kenya Institute of Education (1992), *The Kenya Certificate of Secondary School Syllabus for Christian Religious Education*, Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation.
4. Loukes, H, (1965), *New Ground in Christian Education*, London: SCM Press.
5. Malusu, J. M. (ed.) 1980, *Secondary School Christian Religious Education Panel: Syllabus Review Report*, Unpublished paper.
6. Malusu, J.M. (1985), *A Study of Problems Affecting Implementation of the New Christian Religious Education Curriculum in Selected Lower Primary Schools in Nairobi*, M.Ed. Thesis, Nairobi: Kenyatta University.
7. Muthoni P. (1992), *Adult Catechesis in the African context*, Ph.D. Thesis, Nairobi: Catholic Higher Institute of Eastern Africa.
8. Otiende, J.E. (1982), *Christian Religious Education Kenya: An Assessment of the Evolution and Operation of the Western Missionary Ideology*, Ph.D. Thesis, Hull: Hull University.
9. Republic of Kenya (1964), *The Kenya Education Commission Report*, Nairobi: Government Printer.
10. Republic of Kenya (1968), *The Education Act (1968)*, Nairobi: Government Printer.
11. Wainanina, P. N. (1984), *Teaching of Christian Religious Education: Problems facing Teachers in implementing the New Christian Religious Education Syllabus in the Primary Schools of Thika Municipality*, M.Ed. Thesis, Nairobi: University of Nairobi.