



CHALLENGES FACED BY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEACHERS IN GENDER SENSITIVE TEACHING: A STUDY OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN ESWATINI.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the challenges facing Religious Education (RE) teachers' gender sensitive teaching with a reflective approach to their training programme and practice. It used a qualitative design. An open ended questionnaire was used to collect data. Purposive sampling was used for identifying potential participants; hence, six Religious Education teachers were identified and asked to complete the questionnaire. Data analysis involved reading the data, searching for emerging themes and developing concepts. The research findings indicated that RE teachers felt the need for gender equality to be integrated in teacher training courses. Lack of training, societal norms and student attitudes were identified as challenges facing teachers in gender sensitive teaching. The study concluded that gender sensitive teaching in RE is impossible if teachers are not trained to do so. It was recommended that the Ministry of Education should organize in-service workshops on gender sensitive curriculum implementation.

Keywords: Religious Education, gender equality, teacher training, teaching and learning, gender sensitive curriculum.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious Education and gender sensitive teaching

Teachers, both men and women are a product of the gender construct of the society (Siwolo, 2005). In most communities teachers, like their learners, are socialised in basically patriarchal structures that foster gender inequality. According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2000), a gender-sensitive curriculum promotes equal treatment between men and women, girls and boys, and it encourages them to achieve their full potential. This includes how they interact in and outside the classroom, and how boys and girls are depicted in textbooks. Gender-sensitive attitudes and learning materials promote non-stereotyped images of men and women.

The coming of Christian missionaries saw the introduction of western education in Eswatini. Even with this introduction, the separation according to gender was evident. Lumadi and Shongwe (2010) state that education and salaried jobs were almost exclusively the privilege of men in society. The missionaries' main interest in the development of education in Eswatini had mainly to do with the need to convert local people to the Christian religion. Emaswati were taught how to read the Bible. One major limitation of this kind of education discussed by Shongwe and Lumadi (2010) is that, it did not concentrate on practical worldly subjects, such as building and carpentry and this led to clashes because Emaswati felt that their way of life was undermined. As a result of this dissatisfaction, National Schools were set up to cater for the needs of Emaswati children.

The general aim of education is to contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual, including aesthetic, creative, critical, cultural, emotional, expressive, and intellectual; for personal and home life, for working life, for living in the community and for leisure (Curriculum online 2012). As a curriculum subject, Religious Education has a special role in the development of the whole child because it encompasses all aspects of life. It helps to explore pupils' experiences in depth and to come to understand the deeper factors at work in their lives (Musongole 2010). Its main aim in Eswatini is to enable pupils to appreciate spiritual, moral and religious values. This appreciation is drawn from the religious traditions in Eswatini which is Christianity (RE syllabus for Eswatini).

Religious education aims to "develop students' religious literacy in the light of a religious tradition so that they may participate critically and effectively in the life of their communities and wider society" (A Syllabus for Religious Education for Catholic Schools). This aim promotes the development of knowledge, skills and values which students need to participate as active lifelong learners. The previous R. E. in Eswatini derived content from the teachings of the different religions and they include Swazi (Emaswati) Traditional Religion (STR), Islam and Christianity as reflected by the RE syllabus for Emaswati secondary schools. One of the aims of the syllabus was to enable learners to develop essential skills and provide a broad learning experience which respects the values and beliefs of others, relating to issues of gender, culture and religion. For instance topics included; the role of women, abortion, personal relationships, teachings against abuse, exploitation and violence, sexual orientation as well as discrimination and prejudice in Christianity and STR



(SGCSE Religious Education Syllabus 2011 and 2012). Therefore, the Religious Education teacher should make sure that the learning experiences provided to the learners when teaching these topics are gender sensitive. In Eswatini, the Ministry of Education and Training Sector Policy (2011) encourages gender equality which is the equal enjoyment of rights and access to opportunities and outcomes including resources by men, women, girls, and boys. The policy promotes gender mainstreaming in all sectors including Early Childhood Care and Development, primary school up to teacher training institutions. A study by Dlamini (2013) revealed that there were no gender specific topics in the teacher training colleges RE curriculum. RE teachers cannot be able to address gender equality issues in the classroom if they have not been trained to do so. Hence this study investigated the challenges faced by RE teachers in gender sensitive teaching. The study sought to answer the following research question: What challenges do Religious Education teachers face in teaching a gender sensitive curriculum in primary schools of Eswatini?

Theoretical framework

The study adopts Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory of Gender. The Social Cognitive Theory serves as a basis for learning that includes the social environment as well as the personal factors such as change and cognition of the learner and the behaviour (Bandura, 1999). RE as a school subject embodies all aspects of a learner including the learning of gender roles. The theory emphasises that girls and boys learn about gender roles by observing others and imitating them (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Gender roles are promoted through rewards and punishments for gender appropriate and gender inappropriate behaviours. The theory stresses that there is a connection between the environmental, personal, and behavioural factors. As individuals interrelate, they influence each other's behaviour (Bandura 1997). Furthermore, according to the theory behaviour is observed then modelled in learning new things. Learning occurs through observation; that is, paying attention and then observing the necessary behaviour. Teachers and peers in the classroom/school model the behaviour and learners are likely to repeat the behaviour either good or bad.

Bandura (1977) developed four principles of social learning namely; attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Attention refers to observing what is being modelled either by the parent, teacher, and peers. Retention refers to the fact that people learn by internalising knowledge into their memories. This knowledge is recalled later when a similar situation requires one to respond. Reproduction means people reproduce already learnt knowledge including behaviour, skills, and knowledge when needed. Lastly, motivation in the theory reveals that people need motivation in order to perform any task. Motivation is usually influenced by one's observation of someone being rewarded or punished for their actions. Children learn what is appropriate by watching the actions of other people whom they may perceive as role models, including their teachers at school. They watch their parents, siblings as well as their peers to see what is appropriate for their gender. This theory assists in the development of children because it helps them to figure out the way society wants them to act as different societies require different behaviours from its citizens. Without gender reinforcement, children might stray too far from the social norms of society. The theory is relevant to the study since the school is a social institution where gender roles are portrayed and can be learned as well as imitated by learners. Social systems are created by human beings and are strengthened by man's attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, habits and expectations. The theory could help classroom teachers including those of



RE not to reinforce gender stereotypical roles in the classroom by being positive role models to encourage the learning of the correct kind of behaviour.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Borja, Potter, Wright and Zedick's (1999) study on gender and education observed that boys and girls are treated differently in the classroom. They observed that teachers often call on boys more than girls, they ask boys challenging questions and they urge boys to try harder. This kind of behaviour by teachers reproduces gender inequality. Borja et.al (1999) further state that even in higher education, female students receive less active instruction, both in the quality of time and attention. Sanders (1995) attributes the notion that males excel in Mathematics, Science and Technology and that females excel in the Arts to the many beliefs and cultural influences that are passed down through generations. This idea that boys and girls are naturally good at certain things is part of societies past ignorance of the difference between biological sex and socially construed gender. Musongole (2010) conducted a study on the role of Religious Education in the promotion of girls' rights and the findings revealed that cultural beliefs and practices hinder girls' progress in education as well as the need for the identification of topics in RE and their relevance towards the promotion of girls' educational rights. This should be done despite the influence of cultural beliefs. The study concluded that RE as a subject has the potential to promote the girls educational rights and advancements in schools. According to Ezati (2007) there were many challenges that were identified as being faced by the respondents when trying to incorporate gender equality issues into core courses. For instance lack of awareness of the teacher educators, lack of time and poor structural methodologies among others. Most of these challenges could be overcome if the educators are willing to put an extra effort in trying to train gender sensitive teachers who will in turn produce gender enlightened citizens.

A paper that was presented by Siwolo (2005) at The Seminar on Cooperation on Teacher Education entitled "Challenges for teacher training in instituting gender responsive pedagogy in schools" highlighted key areas of teaching and learning processes where gender inequality is evident, and they include teaching methodologies, teaching and learning materials, language usage in the classroom, teacher-student interaction in the classroom and student-student interaction. These key areas are where trainee teachers need to be equipped with the necessary skills. These problems may seem to be classroom based but they reflect back to teacher training. For the attainment of equality in education the curriculum has to include the gender constraints in the teaching and learning process. Teacher training in the various subjects needs to address the issue of gender equality in order to produce gender sensitive teachers.

A study by Nomlomo and Holmarsdottir (2012) explored experiences of female children in primary schools in selected contexts in South Africa and Sudan and the extent to which their experiences reflect unequal opportunities of access to education and gender inequality. The study revealed that there are challenges among primary school learners. In Sudan, preparing girls for early marriages in the form of home education was a norm, while in South Africa children's access to formal education was prioritised despite other educational challenges experienced by young girls at school, such as sexual harassment. Furthermore, the



situation in these countries were influenced by political factors. For instance, after the War in Sudan free access to education was compromised, whilst in South Africa the apartheid regime brought problems which compromised quality education. The schools that belonged to the former homelands of the apartheid regime were still in poor condition, under resourced, with poor learner achievements thus compromising the education of a girl child.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the qualitative approach. Miles and Huberman cited in Musongole (2012) contend that qualitative data emphasises people's lived experiences, and it is fundamentally suited for locating and connecting these meanings to the social world around them. The qualitative approach was chosen because it helped the researcher to understand how teachers integrate gender equality issues in their teaching, whether they were trained as well as the challenges they face during implementation. Six teachers were chosen as participants because of their knowledge of RE, an attribute is that each person has had a similar experience and training. Locating teachers as participants was done using informal network. An open ended questionnaire was chosen as the main data collecting instrument of the study. Maree (2007) states that when using a questionnaire, it is possible to preserve anonymity of the respondents and this can allow the respondents to respond freely to the items in the questionnaire. The statements in the questionnaire required teachers to reflect on the challenges they face when teaching Religious Education in a gender responsive manner. Fear and embarrassment when responding were minimized since they were not required to write their identity. Gay, Mills and Ariasian (2006) describe data analysis as an attempt by the researcher to summarise collected data in dependable and collective manner. Data analysis began as soon as information was gathered about questions posed. Analysis involved reading the data, searching for emerging themes and developing concepts. The themes were identified from the responses and categorised. The data collected from questionnaires were analysed descriptively and presented in words.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings revealed that the curriculum and textbooks were gender neutral; however, studies have shown that formal neutrality did not guarantee the teaching of a gender responsive curriculum. Hence integration was reported as difficult in situations where many people did not know how to integrate. *'Do they have the ability to recognize gender issues?'* a teacher asked. One of the respondents also complained that those who sensitises gender issues usually tell them about the problem but hardly give them ways of dealing with it. This was particularly in relation to teaching.

Teachers revealed that there were challenges in dealing with gender issues in RE lessons. One teacher even asked if it is possible to deal with gender issues without training. Furthermore, most teachers teach the way they were taught. That is why one respondent reported that it was difficult to integrate gender issues when teaching due to educational background. Therefore, respondents felt that in order to produce gender sensitive RE teachers, there is need to deliberately make teacher educators gain awareness about some of the ways



in which gender could be brought in the forefront of their teaching. This will help them prepare student teachers for the dynamics of the classroom environment they are likely to meet in schools. This finding is similar to that of Ezati (2007) that there were many challenges identified as being faced by the respondents when trying to incorporate gender equality issues into core courses. For instance, lack of awareness of the teacher educators, lack of time and poor structural methodologies among others.

Another challenge identified by teachers was learners' attitude. Learners tend to learn gender roles from the society and bring those attitudes into the classroom. One of the male respondents explained that they are a product of history and that history needs to be removed slowly, although he acknowledges that historically women have been marginalized. He continued to argue that cultural beliefs are still in force. He said '*people want to change issues overnight, which has been there since Biblical times. Yet it should be an evolutionary approach, a slow process.*' Respondents especially females felt that the society at large does not allow equal status to men and women. One female argued that the patriarchal nature of society dictates that women's position belong at home, women should always be subordinate to their husbands and women are to take care of children. This finding concurs with Ezati's (2006) study that the challenges in integrating gender sensitive pedagogy in teaching include lack of gender equality awareness and attitudes of students. Therefore, more awareness is needed to sensitize lecturers and teachers of RE. This can enable them to incorporate gender aspects in their teaching.

The other research question focused on investigating how gender equality issues are addressed during implementation by RE teachers. The data revealed that those teachers actually required to implement gender equality education do not fully understand the concept. In addition, teachers have been found to lack ability to reflect on their own gender-biased instructional behaviours. This finding concurs with Al-Nouh (2008) who observed classes and noted that what teachers perceived to be doing did not match what they were actually practicing. The results also indicated that teachers involved both boys and girls by giving them equal opportunities during classroom discussions. Classroom interaction is an important element in the pedagogical process. Students are not little robots; they are boys and girls with gender specific needs. Especially as they mature, their gender roles and relations have an increasing impact on classroom interactions. This was in line with observation by Jung and Chung (2006) in their study that "the teacher must recognize that this is where such matters such as sexual experimentation, sexual harassment, male domination and female passivity come into play". It is therefore important to create and enforce a conducive learning environment through classroom interaction that is gender responsive.

Teachers also attempted to deliver an RE content that is gender neutral. The methods used varied and they included role play, demonstration, group discussion as well as story- telling. It was observed during group discussions in one class that every learner irrespective of gender was allowed to lead discussions and present the findings before the class. This refutes what has been observed that some teachers unaware directed their questions to boys. Taber & Thorne (1993) posits that teachers spend more time with boys than with girls.



CONCLUSION

Teachers acknowledged the need for addressing gender issues within their classroom to ensure that learners are exposed to the correct kind of behaviour acceptable in society. A subject like RE is appropriate for addressing gender-sensitive issues among learners. The study also concludes that although teachers attempt to teach a gender sensitive curriculum, there are challenges facing the teaching of a gender sensitive RE curriculum in primary schools. These challenges could be curbed if teachers are trained to address gender issues in their initial teacher training as well as continual in-service programs.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. There is need to sensitize teachers on the importance of gender-sensitive pedagogies and integrating them into subjects like RE through workshops and teacher training courses.
2. Textbooks should be designed to depict real life stories where men and women share the same responsibilities and jobs in society.
3. Availability of resources such as teaching materials (textbooks) on gender equality issues.

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