

## Teachers' Use of Life Themes Pedagogy in Christian Religious Studies: A Survey of Senior High Schools in Brong Ahafo Region, Ghana

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### Abstract

*The purpose of the study was to assess the extent to which teachers in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana employed instructional practices that conformed to the Life Themes pedagogy in their teaching of Christian Religious Studies (CRS). The outcome of the study would determine whether or not teachers related the teaching of Religion to the existential experiences of learners. This will provide guidance for policy makers and teachers on the need for making students' real life experiences the basis for teaching Christian Religious Studies. Thirty-six Christian Religious Studies teachers responded to a five-point Likert scale questionnaire. The teachers who were used for the study were selected using the purposive sampling method. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse the data collected. The study revealed that teachers' instructional practices conformed to the Life Themes pedagogy to a large extent, and that they were able to bridge the gap between the students' existential experiences and biblical experience. The study recommends that, in-service training be organised for teachers; group work should be encouraged; questioning and discussion methods should be used extensively; and practical dimension of the subject (CRS) should be explored.*

**Keywords:** Teachers, Life Themes, Pedagogy, Christian Religious Studies, Senior High Schools

### Introduction

Pedagogies of Religious Education have been explored extensively in Britain (Grimmitt, 2000). Among the various pedagogies that have been studied were *Confessional* (Thompson, 2004), *Neo-Confessional* (Cox, 1966), *Phenomenological* (Smart, 1971; Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010), *Gift to the Child* (Hull, 1996), *Interpretive* (Jackson, 1997; 2004), *Concept-cracking* (Cooling, 1994), *Critical Realist* (Wright, 2000), *Narrative* (Erricker, 1995) and *Life themes* (Onsongo, 2002). The *Life Themes approach* or *pedagogy* seeks to examine the life issues of learners (students or pupils) and to encourage them to reflect on those issues against the Biblical messages that are presented to them. Even though the *Life Themes pedagogy* has been used extensively in Britain, not much 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 Ghana. This poses a challenge to the authors to research into this topic. This paper therefore seeks to examine how the instructional practices of Christian Religious Studies (CRS) teachers in Ghana conform to the use of the *Life Themes pedagogy*. The study seeks to answer the research question: "To what extent do the instructional practices of CRS teachers conform to the Life Themes pedagogy?" CRS teachers in senior high schools in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana were used for the study. It is the hope of the researchers that new insights would be gained from this study so as to increase the pedagogical knowledge of Religious Educators. Secondly, it will increase their knowledge in the literature available to the subject. The rest of the study will be organised under the sub-headings: Literature Review, Methodology, Results and Discussions, Conclusions and Recommendations.

## Literature Review

“Pedagogy” is described as the science and art of teaching (Grimmitt, 2000). It generally refers to strategies or style of instruction. The word “pedagogy” comes from the Greek word “*paidagogeos*” which literally means “to lead the child”. In ancient Greek, the “*paidagogos*” was a slave who supervised the education of his master’s son, and led him to school. Pedagogy therefore means leading your learners. Pedagogy is associated with teaching and learning. By nature, it deals with procedures or strategies (methodology) for teaching and learning. It also deals with principles (or content) of learning (Grimmitt, 2000).

The *Life Themes pedagogy* is one of those recommended for the teaching of Religious Education (Grimmitt, 2000). This pedagogy was believed to have been developed between the 1950’s and the 1960’s by the Roman Catholic Church. It was developed through catechetical congresses held in Bangkok, Thailand in 1962; Katigondo, Uganda in 1964; Manila, Philippines in 1967; and Medellin, Colombia in 1968 (Onsongo, 2002). The *Life Themes pedagogy, which is applied to the teaching of Religious Education* was adopted at these conferences for the purpose of teaching catechism in the Catholic Church. This pedagogy was to ensure that Bible messages would be related to human or existential experiences of the learners (Muthoni, 1992). Examples of themes that relate to life are the “home” and the “family”.

The *Life themes pedagogy* was applied to Religious Education in schools in Britain in the 1960’s and the 1970’s when the launching of a revolution in Religious Education led to the condemnation of the *Confessional approach or pedagogy*. This pedagogy was condemned by educators as a result of the revelations of two main research findings. The first was through the influence of psychology of learning. For example, the research findings of psychologists like Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg and Ronald Goldman revealed that learners’ experiences played a major role in their learning process. The second was through the influence of philosophy of education that the relevance of every subject in the school curriculum should be justified on educational grounds (Peters, 1966). This revolution in Religious Education led to changing the criteria for the selection of themes to be taught, and changing the aims of teaching the subject (Matthews, 1965).

*Life themes pedagogy* is one of the good pedagogic practices in Religious Education which has been recommended by Grimmitt (2000). This pedagogic practice was developed through the works of researchers like Piaget (1948), Goldman (1964; 1965) and Kohlberg (1969). Having revealed through the research works of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg that there is a limit to what learners can achieve based on their age, Ronald Goldman recommended that life themes should be used for the teaching of Religious Education at the childhood stages, but not religious materials. He rather recommended that religious materials which should be used as the content for the study should be reserved for adolescents. Loukes (1965) added his voice by stating that success in other subjects has been achieved by using the learners’ experiences. He therefore suggested that the same success can be achieved in Religious Education if the same approach will be used.

According to Onsongo (2002), four main steps are involved in the use of the *Life themes approach or pedagogy*. These are: (i) Human Experience, (ii) Biblical Experience, (iii) Explanation, (iv) Application and Response. The Human Experience involves using the experiences of the learner as the basis upon which the religious material would be built, for example, the birth of siblings. The Religious (or Biblical) Experience is introduced to the learner from the Biblical text, e.g. the birth of Jesus Christ. The Explanation involves giving an exposition on the Biblical text. The Application and Response stage involves relating the content to the lives of the learners, and giving them the opportunity to react and respond to the lesson that has been taught.

In Ghana, not many studies have been conducted on the pedagogies of Religious Education. The only works that have been published so far are based on the *Existential pedagogy* (Asare-Danso, 2010) and the *Values Clarification pedagogy* (Asare-Danso, 2010), hence, the need to explore the other pedagogies. With regard to the content of the subject, Anti, Ntrel & Antwi (1996) have written a textbook on Christian Religious Studies (CRS) for Senior High Schools in Ghana. This has become a standard textbook for CRS students in Ghana for almost two decades.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The descriptive survey design was employed in carrying out this study. Descriptive survey design is the one which involves the collection of data in order to test hypothesis or answer research questions concerning the current status of the subject under investigation (Gay, 1992). This design was chosen because it offered the researchers the opportunity to observe, assess and describe the extent to which the CRS teachers in Senior High Schools in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana have been using the Life Themes approach or pedagogy. According to Amedahe (2002) descriptive research provides accurate and objective description of activities, objects, processes and persons. Nevertheless, the design may have its own weakness, as there is no way to statistically analyse results, because there is no manipulation of variables as in experimental designs.

### **Population**

Brong Ahafo is one of the ten administrative regions in Ghana. It has Sunyani as its regional capital. It has 55 Senior High Schools in the region, out of which 10 were established by missions (or faith-based organisation). For our study, the population comprised all CRS teachers in the Senior High Schools in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana. The teachers were fifty-five (55) in number. The CRS teachers were selected because they teach the subject, and it is expected that they may be using the Life Themes pedagogy in their instructional delivery.

### **Sample and Sampling Procedure**

Samples are expected to be selected based on scientific basis. For this reason, in determining the sample size for our study, the table for determining sample size from a given population suggested by Krejcie & Morgan (as cited in Sarantakos, 1997, p. 163) was used. The purposive sampling procedure was used to select teachers for the study. Using this sampling techniques (also known as judgemental sampling), we purposely chose subjects who in our own opinion, could provide relevant information to our research topic, as suggested by Sarantakos (1997). From our own judgement, those who teach CRS in the Senior High Schools in Brong Ahafo Region could be in a better position to provide the needed information pertaining to the use of the Life Themes pedagogy.

There were 55 Senior High Schools in the Brong Ahafo Region and only 35 out of these schools offered CRS. Thus, out of the 35 schools, 29 accessible schools were selected for the study. There were 45 teachers of CRS in the 29 accessible schools. Therefore, 36 teachers were involved in the study. Thus, the number of CRS teachers that were involved in the study was dependent on the number of people who taught CRS. We thought that this could help to increase the representativeness of the sample, so that it could add to the credibility of the final results.

### **Research Instruments**

Two research instruments, namely observation guide and questionnaire were used for the data collection. Sidhu (1984) posits that a questionnaire is a form prepared and distributed to secure responses to certain questions. It is a systematic compilation of questions that are submitted to a sampling population from which information is desired. The questionnaire was used because of its advantages over other instruments. For example, according to Osuala (2005), the interview is very expensive to use because it requires more time and funds to gather data from subjects during the study. This gives the use of the questionnaire some comparative advantage over the use of the interview.

McBurney (2007) gave two basic categories of questionnaires as closed-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire items we used were grouped into five parts with the first part dealing with the socio-demographic background of the respondents. Apart from the socio-demographic background which was a mixture of open and closed ended questions the rest were five point Likert scale items.

According to Sarantakos (1997), observation is one of the oldest methods of data collection, and “it literally means ... a method of data collection that employs vision as its main means of data collection” (p. 208). We employed a structured non-participant observation. The observation guide was structured by the use of a Likert scale. The application of observation guide was due to the fact that we wanted to make up for the deficiencies that might occur with the use of the questionnaire. Besides, the use of observation was relatively inexpensive, not time consuming, and it helped us to obtain first hand information for our study.

### ***Validity and Reliability of Instrument***

The research instruments were subjected to a validity and reliability test. The instruments were given to an expert to ascertain how they meet face and content validity. The suggestions given by the expert were used to effect the necessary changes to improve upon the validity of instrument. Thereafter, a pilot test of the instruments was conducted whereby the observation guide and questionnaires were administered in selected schools in the Cape Coast Metropolis. This area was chosen for the pilot study because the curriculum as implemented in this area has the same characteristics in terms of content and pedagogical practices, as compared to what pertains in the Brong Ahafo region. The students also bore similar characteristics in terms of age, as compared to the students in the Brong Ahafo Region. Moreover, students from the Brong Ahafo Region and those in the Central Region write the same examination, and were expected to relate biblical experiences to their existential experiences. The teachers from both regions also had similar characteristics in terms of academic and professional qualifications.

The data gathered were analysed and the Cronbach's alpha was established for each of the items. For the teachers' questionnaire, the value of Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 was obtained. For the observation guide, Cronbach's alpha of 0.77 was obtained. According to De Vellis (1991), such a reliability coefficient is said to be respectable. Therefore, the instrument was considered reliable and appropriate to collect the relevant data to answer the question posed. Also, Fraenkel and Wallen (2000, p. 17), posited that "For research purposes a useful rule of thumb is that reliability should be at .70 and preferably higher". With this, the instrument could be said to be of good quality capable of collecting useful data for the study. The queries that came out of the item analyses were catered for. The reliability of the instruments was determined using the Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS). All these actions were taken to ensure that the instrument would be capable of collecting quality, credible and useful data for the study.

### ***Data Analysis***

This study sought to investigate how teachers use the Life themes approach or pedagogy in teaching CRS in the Senior High Schools in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana. The type of statistics that was employed in the analysis of the data was descriptive. Specifically, the data were analysed through the computation of frequencies, percentages, mean of means and standard deviation distributions. This was done with the use of computer software called Statistical Product and Service Solutions. The data from teachers' questionnaire and observational data were analysed separately.

### ***Results and Discussion***

The results of the study were tabulated. Descriptive statistics namely, means and standard deviations were used for the analysis to aid comprehensive and holistic discussion. Table 1 shows the responses of the teachers on how their instructional practices conform to the Life Themes approach or pedagogy.

**Table 1: How Teachers' Instructional Practices Conform to the Life Themes Approach (Teachers' Questionnaire)**

Statements	M	SD
Students' real life experiences form the basis of discussions in the classroom.	2.03	1.00
Students are encouraged to use real life experiences in setting example in CRS.	1.53	.51
Students use real life experiences in explaining what is studied from the Bible.	1.58	.50
Concrete, real and present situation of learners are considered in asking questions in class.	1.64	.49
Students are encouraged to use real, concrete and present situation in answering.	1.64	.59
Through the use of role-play, students are offered the opportunity to relate Bible stories to their own life.	1.69	.47
Assessment procedures that give students opportunity.	1.78	.93
Students' experiences are considered in grouping them in the classroom.	2.03	.81
Students who are able to relate Biblical stories to real life experiences are given rewards to serve as motivation.	2.19	1.01
Religion has a private affair so the approach to teaching it should help learners to make their own free choice.	1.72	.94

Scale: 1= Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Uncertain 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly disagree.

Mean of means = 1.78

Mean of standard deviation = 0.73

It could be asserted that the use of good instructional practices can facilitate the use of the Life Themes approach. For this reason, the teacher should have the needed expertise in using the Life Themes pedagogy. Thus teachers, in their own creativity, combine instructional practices with content knowledge to facilitate teaching and learning. This section looks at how the teachers' instructional practices conform to the Life themes pedagogy.

A look at Table 1 shows that according to the teachers, their instructional practices conform to the Life Themes approach. This is confirmed by the mean of means of 1.78 and a mean of standard deviation of 0.73 indicating a strong support for the assertion. The mean of means when converted to the nearest whole falls into the scale 2 (Agree). The following instances explain this position.

Initially, regarding the item, "students real life experiences formed the basis of discussions in the classroom", 2.03 (mean) and 1.00 (standard deviation) were obtained for this item. The implication of this is that majority of the respondents agreed to this view. Students were also encouraged to use real life experiences in setting examples. This is explicit in the fact that 1.53 mean and .51 standard deviation were obtained for the statement. Thus, all the CRS teachers support this view. The implication of this is that the gap between the biblical experiences and existential experiences is bridged, allowing a free transfer of relevant previous knowledge into the new knowledge.

In connection with how students were given the opportunity to use their own real life experiences in explaining what was studied from the Bible, 1.58 and .50 were the figures obtained for this item. All the respondents supported this. It is also clear from Table 1, that concrete real and present situation of learners were considered in asking question in class, and the use of concrete and present situation in answering question all had the same mean figure of 1.64 each. However, their standard deviation varied, with the former having a standard deviation of .49 and the latter having a standard deviation of .59. What could be responsible for the variation in standard deviation for the two, though they had the same mean, may be due to the fact that more respondents supported the view that the way they asked questions conform to the Life themes pedagogy than how students answered questions.

It was clearly evident that a significant majority of the teachers had very good questioning skills that conformed to the use of the Life themes pedagogy. These findings go with Ornstein and Lasley (2000) who posited that "Good teaching involves good questioning, especially, when teaching large groups of students. Skilful questioning can arouse students' curiosity, stimulate their imagination and motivate them to search for new knowledge" (p. 179).

Furthermore, according to all the teachers, they used role-play to offer the students the opportunity to relate biblical concepts to their life experiences. Here, 1.69 (mean) and .47 (standard deviation) were gained for the statement. The mean of this item plunges into the scale 2 (Agree). Assessment procedures that gave students opportunity to relate biblical stories to life were adopted in teaching CRS. According to Kissock and Lyortsum (1982), we have low order and high order questions. The high order type of questions which calls for synthesis and application of knowledge is the most suitable type of questions that conform to the Life Themes pedagogy. In addition, students' real life experiences were considered in grouping them during CRS lesson. Majority of the teachers supported this view. The students had stated earlier that their real life experiences were considered in asking and answering questions during CRS lessons. This implied that teacher's assessment procedures conformed to the Life Themes pedagogy.

During the observation sections in the selected schools, it was realized that a significant majority of the teachers' used assessment procedures that conformed to the Life Themes pedagogy. This was observed both in their oral and written lesson evaluation sections. The teachers indicated that students were motivated to use their real life experiences to answer questions. In line with this, 2.19 (mean) and 1.01 (standard deviation) were recorded for this statement. Marks, praises and claps were the only known motivation that we saw during the observation sections.

Lastly, the statement, "religion has a private affair so the approach to teaching it should help learners to make their own free choice"; had majority of the teachers supporting this position. This finding goes with the position of Onsongo (2002) that religion is a private affair, so the approach used in teaching the subject should be one that could help the learner to make his/her own free choice. A careful look at the items that border on finding out how the teachers' instructional practices conformed to the Life Themes pedagogy revealed that to a large extent teachers' instructional practices conformed to the Life Themes pedagogy.

Table 2 deals with the data from observation of classroom interactions on how teachers' instructional practices conform to the life themes pedagogy.

**Table 2: How Instructional Practices of the Teacher Conforms to the Life Themes Approach (Observational Data)**

Instructional practices	Very much N (%)	Much N (%)	Somehow N (%)	Not at all N (%)
Discussion	30 (51.7)	16 (27.6)	8 (13.8)	4 (6.9)
Questioning	20 (34.5)	14 (24.1)	20 (34.5)	4 (6.9)
Group work	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	58 (100)
Explanation of points	10 (17.2)	34 (58.6)	10 (17.2)	4 (6.9)
Giving of example and citing instances	21 (36.2)	27 (46.6)	6 (10.3)	4 (6.9)
Evaluation	19 (32.8)	29 (50)	6 (10.3)	4 (6.9)

From Table 2, it could be deduced that majority of the teachers employed instructional practices that conformed to the Life Themes pedagogy. This could be seen from the following instances: Through the Discussion, it was revealed that the degree of conformity for very much usage of the Discussion method was 51.7%; much usage was 27.6%; being used somehow was 13.8%; and not being used at all was 6.9%. In line with the use of questioning, 34.5% conformed very much; 24.1% showed much conformity; 34.5% somehow conformed; while 6.9% did not show any conformity. Concerning the use of Group work, the study revealed that none of the teachers grouped the students in the lessons observed. So it could not be ascertained whether they consider life experiences in grouping. However, the data from teachers confirmed that they considered students' real life experiences in grouping learners. Probably the teachers used Group work in their daily lessons but the topics that were selected for observation did not encourage the use of Group work.

With regards to Explanation of points, 17.2% conformed very much to the pedagogy, 58.6% much, 17.2% somehow and 6.9% not at all. In the same way, in giving examples and citing instances, 36.2% of the lesson conformed to the method very much; 46.6% much; 10.3% somehow; and 6.9% did not show conformity at all. So with explanation of points and citing instances, majority of the teachers took cognisance of the Life Themes pedagogy. It was found out that the evaluation sections conformed to the Life Themes pedagogy. This was depicted both in their oral and written questions that the students were asked to respond to. Students were asked to talk about the moral lessons that could be drawn from the lessons. They were also asked on several occasions to talk about the significance of the biblical narratives that were studied.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it could be asserted that majority of the lessons that were observed conformed to the Life Themes pedagogy to a large extent. The lessons were learner-centred and interactive in nature. The situation in Kenyan Secondary Schools as found by Onsongo (2002) is very different from the situation in Ghana, specifically in the Brong Ahafo Region. In terms of the use of the Life Themes pedagogy, the teachers' instructional practices conformed to a large extent to the Life Themes pedagogy. Even though nothing could be said about the situation in the remaining nine regions of Ghana, it was evident that the way the CRS teachers employed the pedagogy varied from one person to the other. This could be attributed to the fact that the teachers had different professional background and experience.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the research findings and conclusion, the following recommendations have been made:

1. In-service training programme should be organised for teachers by the stakeholders of education like the Ministry of Education. This will help sharpen the pedagogical skills of CRS teachers, in order to equip them to teach the subject effectively.
2. The study has revealed that CRS teachers do not use Group work during their teaching, even though the Life Themes pedagogy encourages learners to explore shared human experience (Rudge, 2000, p. 101). It is recommended that Group work should be encouraged by CRS teachers.

3. The study has revealed that questioning stimulates the interest of learners, and motivates them to learn. It is therefore recommended that teachers make effective use of questioning techniques when teaching CRS.
4. The study has also revealed that the “discussion” method was extensively used by CRS teachers. It is recommended that CRS teachers in the other nine regions of Ghana be encouraged to use the discussion method in order to promote effective teaching and learning of the subject.
5. The study has further revealed that the use of the Life Themes pedagogy helps teachers to relate the teaching of Religion to life. Teachers are therefore encouraged to use student-centred teaching methods like role play, in order to explore the practical dimension of the subject, and to promote its effective teaching and learning.

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