

## Students' Academic Performance in Religious Education: A Case of Selected Schools in Botswana

**Baamphattha Dinama and Koketso Jeremiah**  
 University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana

**Boitumelo Sihlupheki-Jorowe**  
 Sedibelo Junior Secondary School, Mochudi, Botswana

**Masego Keakantse**  
 Bonnington Junior Secondary School, Gaborone, Botswana

**Rebonyetsala Kemoabe**  
 Moselewapula Junior Secondary School, Gaborone, Botswana

**Bafedile Kgaswe**  
 Ithuteng Junior Secondary School, Mochudi, Botswana

**Mpolokang Motshosi**  
 Gabane Junior Secondary School, Gabane, Botswana

**Oshi Sebina**  
 Kgamanyane Junior Secondary School, Mochudi, Botswana

**Abstract.** This research investigated students' academic performance in Religious Education (RE) in three junior secondary schools in Gaborone in Botswana. The sample comprised seven (7) Religious Education teachers, two (2) deputy school heads, three (3) focus groups of students and two (2) parent representatives. The study used a qualitative research methodology and a case study design that entailed interviews, lesson observations and document analysis. The findings reveal that teachers as the pillars of an effective instructional delivery process need to have a deep content and pedagogical knowledge as well as possess adequate assessment skills. In addition, students' positive academic performance requires a warm and welcoming classroom climate. This study also identified various factors that may contribute to an improvement in students' academic performance such as parent and teacher cooperation, as well as the availability of teaching and learning resources.

**Keywords:** academic performance; Religious Education; junior secondary schools; assessment skills; Botswana.

## **Background**

Religious Education (RE) as a subject within the Botswana curriculum has been undergoing a shift since its inception, which can be traced from the arrival of the missionaries. The first RE curriculum was Christian based and was phased out when the multi-faith one was introduced in 1996 (Dinama, 2013). Over the years, the learners' performance has been good with the Christian based curriculum as compared to the multi-faith one where at national examinations level the performance declined drastically due mainly to teachers' lack of assessment skills in RE. However, teachers attribute students' poor performance to the 'over-loaded' curriculum which in their view contains too much content to be adequately covered during the three years period in which students will be doing their junior secondary schooling (Dinama, 2010). Furthermore, it has to be noted that in 2008 the multi-faith curriculum that used the phenomenological approach in teaching and learning was reviewed, and both its content and approach were changed. Dinama (2010) notes that the 2008 revised multi-faith RE curriculum adopted the interpretive approach while the content stressed Christianity and this was done in order to make assessment easier. Despite all these changes, it is notable that students' academic performance in RE still remains unsatisfactory.

## **Statement of the problem**

Students' academic performance in RE has been declining over the years since the introduction of the multi-faith based RE syllabus in 2008 that uses the interpretive approach. Speculations have been made for the low performance and they include; teachers' lack of content and pedagogical knowledge and inadequate assessment skills. Furthermore, the studies show that students do not perform well due to problems associated with their family background and general school environment (Egalite, 2016; Foley, 2008; Schaps, 2005). This study therefore explored causes of the decline in the performance of the RE at junior certificate level in selected schools in Gaborone, in Botswana. The study was guided by two key research questions.

## **Key research questions**

1. What factors cause a decline in academic performance with respect to the multi-faith Religious Education (RE) curriculum?
2. What are the possible solutions to factors that cause a decline in students' academic performance?

## **Significance of the study**

This study will benefit or assist the department of Religious Education both at school and ministerial levels and specifically in teacher training and development by identifying issues of concern and problems faced by teachers in the teaching and learning of Religious Education. It will provide relevant information to the Department of Teacher Training and Development on how to develop relevant and efficient in-service training programs for RE teachers especially in relation to assessment. Similarly, it will provide information to RE

teachers at school level and help them to make an introspection of how they have been conducting their teaching and assessment of with respect to RE. It is hoped that this will enhance instructional techniques and assessment skills that will improve students' academic performance in RE.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Academic performance is mainly related to assessment and it is about a student's success or lack of it in meeting short- or long-term goals in education. How students perform reflect how well they have mastered the content taught (Ballard & Bates, 2008). However, there are various factors that ensure and are considered to be hindering good performance in educational settings. Some of these factors are; language as a medium of instruction, teaching and learning resources, parental involvement, study habits, class size, teachers' pedagogical and assessment skills (Farooq, Chaudry, Shafiq & Berhan, 2011). It has been observed that since the introduction of the multi-faith curriculum in 1996 in Botswana, RE students have been performing poorly (Dinama, 2010).

Student academic performance is of paramount importance in every academic institution (Regier, 2011) and that is why the students' academic performance in RE remains a top priority for educators in religion. This is because when students achieve good grades, they become competitive in the world of work and may have better employment opportunities.

### **Factors affecting students' academic performance**

There are various factors that contribute to good student academic performance and these may include: teacher beliefs in relation to their profession, content and pedagogical knowledge, and assessment skills. On the part of students; peer influence, attitudes towards learning and family background can have a bearing on students' performance (Farooq, 2011; Hijazi & Naqvi, 2006; Jeynes, 2007). In addition, cooperation and collaboration amongst teachers, student-teacher ratio, and unavailability of learning resources can also have an impact on students' performance (Aturupane, Glewwe & Wisniewski, 2010; Farooq et al. 2011).

The manner in which the teacher plans and organizes instruction, to a large extent determines the outcome of students' academic performance. Therefore, pedagogy and assessment skills are important aspects that contribute to students' academic performance. It is thus, the teachers' responsibility to employ diverse teaching styles to enhance students' academic performance since current instruction assessment techniques seem to favour certain learning styles (Damavandi, Mahyuddin, Elias, & Daud, 2011). Besides, there has to be a good match between students' learning preferences and instructor's teaching styles which have been demonstrated to have a positive effect on students' performance (Harb & El-Shaarawi, 2006). A study by Dinama (2010) on RE teaching in Botswana public schools reveals that teachers' inadequate

pedagogical skills result in students' poor academic performance. For example, as they taught teachers chose to focus on religions that they favoured even though that was not the expectation of the core curriculum. Furthermore, teachers struggled to draw on student knowledge as a resource (Dinama, 2010). In the same study, Dinama (2010) observed that Religious Education teachers possessed poor assessment skills in terms of poorly written test items. For example, he cited incidents where internal monthly, termly tests and external examinations did not correlate. The cause and source of this could be that teachers do not possess adequate assessment skills and this is reflected in the poor final national RE examinations results. For example, at school level, students would get very high marks in school-based tests and examinations while obtaining low grades in the final national examinations (Dinama, 2010). In addition, inadequate pedagogical knowledge and assessment skills, teachers' lack of collaboration with one another are amongst some of the causes of students' poor academic performance. In addition, a study carried out by Burry-Stock (2003) revealed that teachers' assessment practices were inadequate to meet the demands of classroom assessment due to insufficient or lack of training in assessment.

The language of instruction is another factor that has an impact on students' academic performance (Nyathi- Saleshando, 2011) because if the students' possess adequate communication skills and a strong command of English which is a medium of instruction, it will thus increase their performance. In multicultural settings, students bring along with them different languages that if not acknowledged by the educational system may impede academic learning resulting in poor performance (Harb and El Shaarawi, 2006; Jotia & Pansiri, 2013; Nyathi- Saleshando, 2011; Pansiri, 2011). All these various learners speak different indigenous languages and bring with them a wide range of cultural traditions that can be of value to their learning if they were incorporated in the education system. However, their mother tongue is not used as a medium of instruction in both public and private schools in Botswana. As Khan (2014) notes, "language has a central position in all situations involving human beings" (p. 1) and consequently, student performance is negatively influenced by students' weak communication skills in the language of instruction (Benson, 2004; Mulkey, 2012; Pflapsen 2013). Thus language can be an impediment to student academic performance because it can silently exclude some from the education system. In the same vein, in RE students learn abstract concepts which need mastery of the English language which is a medium of instruction as well as an official language in Botswana therefore. Therefore, if students have difficulties in understanding the language of instruction, that may negatively impact their academic performance.

### *Parental Involvement*

Ballard and Bates, (2008) point out that for assessment to be effective, students, parents, teachers, administrators, policy makers and researchers need to share responsibility in educational matters. Thus, parental involvement is core to students' academic success (Pansiri, 2008; William & Jeynes, 2007). Parents' attitudes towards education can influence the students' performance. Pansiri

(2008) further posits that parental participation in school curriculum matters permits them to learn strategies of helping their children hence an enhanced students' performance. Actually, there is a connection between parental association and the children's accomplishment in the classroom. Pansiri (2008) further explains that the Botswana's Revised National Policy on Education of 1994 has a section which encouraged the community in general to actively play a part in the development and running of education. It also emphasized the significance of involving the community and parents in certain decision making matters that could influence the education of their children through Parents Teachers Association (PTA) and other committees or associations.

### *Resources and academic performance*

Learning resources are identified as yet another factor determining students' academic performance. Karemera, Reuben and Sillah (2003) found that students' academic performance is significantly connected to the availability of educational resources like library, computer laboratory and textbooks in an institution. Godfrey (2012) notes that resources are vital since they do inform and guide teachers in their teaching. This is true in the context of Botswana because resources like textbooks are limited leading to students writing their final examinations without having accessed them thus affecting their academic performance. Poor results in RE in Botswana is also attributed to the absence of core text books which cover the content of the curriculum fully (Dinama, 2010). Even in instances where textbooks are available, teachers rarely explore other readily available resources, such as the library and the internet, to increase their own and their students' knowledge about religions.

Inadequate learning infrastructure lead learners having their lessons carried out in places such as laboratories, libraries, out-door spaces and school dining-hall that are not designed to be classrooms (Archibald, 2006). Inadequate resources impinge on classroom activities and instructional techniques since a large number of students will be squeezed in the few available classrooms. In their study, Bandiera, Larcinese, and Rasul (2010) noted that class size is a factor that impacts students' academic performance. In addition, the teacher-student ratio has a bearing on how teachers attend to individual students because if an average student is moved to a large class his or her performance will necessarily drop (Bandiera, Larcinese & Rasul, 2010) due to inadequate attention by the teacher (Monks & Schmidt, 2010). Teacher-student ratio therefore negatively affects students' academic performance (Yelkpieri, Namale, Esia-Donkoh & Ofofu-Dwamena, 2012). If the class is too large the teacher will naturally fail to adequately interact with all learners and would not be able to fully engage them into the various classroom activities.

Moreover, students' academic performance can be affected by entry points of the previous performance at a lower level (Geiser & Santelices, 2007) since ideally a selection rank based on a student's overall academic achievement is the best single predictor of future success. Sentamu (2003) adds that, measures of prior educational performance are the most important determinants of student performance. This implies that the higher the previous performance, the likelihood that the students will perform better academically in future. This is

true in respect of the Botswana education system because students are automatically promoted after completion of their Standard Seven regardless of the grades they would have achieved and this in turn is reflected in their poor junior secondary school results (Dinama, 2010). In addition, Reyann, (2011) argues that a grade is a primary indicator in learning and if a learner earns high grades it is concluded that he or she has learnt a lot while low grades indicate learning to a lesser extent. Dinama, (2010) further observes that, throughout his fieldwork in research about implementation of the multi-faith RE curriculum, the poor results in RE at national level were a common concern among teachers. This is worrisome because students come with poor results from primary schools due to automatic progression and after final examinations teachers are expected to account for the results, as well as the value they would have added to the results of these students upon entering secondary school classrooms.

## **Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This study adopted a qualitative methodology which expects the researcher to explore in depth explanations of issues to comprehend a phenomenon in its natural locale as well as to learn from the experiences of the participants (Chilisa & Preece, 2005). In doing so, it attempts to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to it (Denzin, 1994). In this way, the methodology centres on the meanings, behaviours of people, their settings, and experiences (Hancock, 2002, Tewksbury, 2009). In this study, it was the experiences, perspectives and intuitions of teachers that were explored.

### **Research design, population and sampling procedures**

The study employed a case study research design since it assisted the researchers in exploring the students' performance and the use of numerous sources of evidence (Yin, 1984). In this way, the design allowed the researchers to examine a rather sensitive and complex issue of students' academic performance. The case study was conducted in three schools that are in an urban setting in Gaborone and were given pseudonyms namely Boasa, Nageng and Maareng Junior Secondary Schools. The criterion used to select these three schools was based on geographical location and the socio-economic background of the areas that 'feed' these schools with secondary school students.

The study employed purposive sampling of participants in the selected schools. The participants were nine (9) Religious Education teachers in three (3) junior secondary schools in Gaborone who have been in the field for a minimum of five years and were specialists in RE. Long serving teachers were chosen because teaching experience of typically five years or more is associated with an internalisation of a curriculum. In each school there was a focus group discussion of fifteen (15) students and five (5) students were from each form or level, that is, Form 1 - 3. Students were chosen because they are in a good position to articulate their academic performance and the challenges they encounter in learning RE. Moreover, the Student Representative Council (SRC) academic members were also used as participants because they are involved in

students' welfare. Furthermore, three (3) PTA chairpersons per school as the key linkage between school and the parents were chosen to give data in line with the rate of parental involvement in students' academic work. The deputy school heads were also chosen since they coordinate all academics matters in their schools and are responsible for keeping students' academic records.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The researchers used classroom observations, interviews and document analysis to gather information. Interviews were used in order to understand the lived experiences of teachers, learners and parents, and the meaning they make of these experiences. Kvale (2004) states that interviews help obtain descriptions of the lived world of the participants with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the phenomena under investigation. Seidman (2012) affirms that an interview is a powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues when used to understand the experiences of individuals whose lives reflect issues raised in a study. Through the use of interviews, valuable knowledge and nuggets of essential meaning were unearthed in this study. In addition, they help create an atmosphere that allows participants to talk freely since ethical considerations would have been observed. Interviews help to probe deeply into the thoughts and responses of the participants and to uncover previously unknown details since the participants are encouraged to talk freely (Dinama, 2010). Therefore, the researchers came up with interview schedules that were used to meet with the participants at different intervals in a special room that was allocated. In addition, the researchers used research guide questions to orally interview the participants.

Classroom observations were also used for data collection because observations help take note of any biased actions because of the presence of the researcher in the setting (Chilisa & Preece, 2005). Observations accord the investigators the opportunity to be first hand eye witness who would check for non-verbal expressions of feelings as to articulate the information that participants may be unable or reluctant to share with others. In this study the researchers sat in class to watch the proceedings of the lessons and also took down notes. Classroom observations were used for data collection because they assess first-hand information on how RE is taught. In observing RE lessons, the researchers were able to witness and observe teachers' actions in the classrooms and comprehend what was communicated even in non-verbal expressions (Kawulich, 2005). Marshall and Rossman (1995) further posit that classroom environment as a research site also offers significant data for the research.

Document were also analysed as a way of understanding and interpreting the phenomenon (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen & Razaveih, 2010) and in this case, it was the students' academic records. Document analysis focuses on interpreting recorded material in order to understand more about human behaviour or the phenomenon under investigation. Documents are a valuable basis of verification of other forms of unrecorded data since they assist in exploring the actual content by comparing or contrasting perspectives (Ary et al. 2010). Moreover, document analysis is helpful when looking for patterns in order to build up a

picture of the phenomena that is being observed. Documents can help rebuild events and give evidence about social proceedings as well as corroborate observations and interviews and thus make conclusions trustworthy and reliable. 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 need to be understood and interpreted within that environment. Documents such as schemes of work, lesson plans and samples of students' work were analysed. These documents are important because they reflected what transpired in the RE lessons. Tests and examination papers were also sampled and analysed to verify their standard and quality.

The researchers took ethical considerations into account by informing the participants about the purpose of the study, procedures to be followed and its benefits to them as well as assuring them of the confidentiality of the information they would provide. In qualitative research the informed consent of participants is respected (Roache, 2014). In addition, participants were given pseudonyms as a way of further enhancing confidentiality.

### **Trustworthiness and transferability**

Various methods of data collection were used and the aim was to bring about a balance and establish trustworthiness of the data due to this triangulation (Ely, 1991; Elliot et al 2011; Goodwin & Goodwin (1996). In addition, several sources of data allowed transferability, so that the reader could decide whether or not the existing setting is related to similar situations (Shenton, 2004).

### **Data presentation and analysis**

#### **Introduction**

The data was based on the interviews, document analysis and class observations done in three junior secondary schools namely Boasa, Maareng and Nageng. The interviewees comprised the deputy school head, RE teachers, focus groups of RE students and parent representatives. Various issues emerged during research that proved to be contributing factors towards declining academic performance of students in RE. The issues included planning by teachers, student-teacher ratios, syllabus coverage, parental involvement, in-service training, and assessment skills, language of instruction, teaching pedagogy, resources and students' attitudes towards learning RE.

#### **Planning by RE teachers**

Planning as a fundamental requirement in teaching and learning entails the organization of academic content into manageable units which comprise scheme books, lesson planning and objectives derived from the syllabus document. Scheme books were in line with the syllabus in terms of the objectives and were divided accordingly to the weeks of the term. The record of what had been covered was recorded fortnightly as well as the students' marks for end of month tests. Also, the lesson plan books were checked but some were not up to date for example one belonging to *Teacher A* at Maareng Junior Secondary

School (JSS). The lesson plan book for Form 1s contained three lesson plans each from the three topics schemed for the term yet in her record of work she had covered twelve specific objectives. However, this was not the case at Boasa and Nageng JSS since the lesson plans were up to date and were consistent with what was in the teachers' booklets for lesson planning. In addition, the schemes of work of these RE teachers at the two schools were consistent with the syllabus objectives.

The information in the three documents namely the syllabus, scheme of work and lesson planning booklets should correlate in order to enhance students learning and achievement of the syllabus and teaching objectives. If these documents do not link as it was the case at Maareng JSS then it would show that the planning was haphazard. This in itself may affect instructional delivery as well as learning and could eventually impact negatively on students' academic achievement. For example, the end of February results for Form 1s at Maareng JSS indicated poor results as there was a mere 5% "quality pass" which is 60% and above. On the other hand where there was an alignment of these documents the results tended to be good. For instance, end of February tests results in Boasa showed an improvement in results since there was 28% quality pass, 61% quantity pass, which is 40% and above and lower 11% fail.

With regard to planning, there was incongruence between what should have been covered and what the teacher had covered at Maareng JSS. It had surfaced that the Form 3s at Maareng were still doing Form 2 content work and this showed that the teacher had not organized the content well against the time allocated. At the same school, poor planning was not only evident in the available documents but it was also highlighted by students during interviews. This is what Tebogo one Form 3 student had to say concerning this issue:

We are behind with the syllabus and the teacher asks us to go and read on some topics at home which is difficult for some of us.

Thato added by saying; "Our teacher skips some topics and asks us to bring CDs for him to download notes for us and this is difficult because not everyone can afford those CDs". The learners' responses reflect that the teacher does not care as he compromises planning by shifting his daily lesson preparation responsibility to students. It is the responsibility of the teacher, when they skip topics, to make sure that all students access all the necessary information without any limitations. At Nageng JSS it was a different case since the planning was consistent with the time allocated for the term. For example, the Form 3s had completed Term 1 content as per the scheme of work. Similarly, at Boasa JSS there were also moving at the right pace with content coverage as planned for the term. In essence, in these three schools some teachers took seriously the responsibility of planning which is an important component of both teaching and learning which need not be neglected.

## Challenges faced by teachers in teaching of RE

### *Resources*

Teachers face a number of challenges in their daily classroom practice. From the data collected, all the participants noted the shortage of textbooks and classrooms for RE as a major challenge. Most of RE classes are not allocated rooms and in most instances they move around during the lessons looking for a vacant room. At Maareng JSS shortage of textbooks and classrooms for teaching RE was identified as the major challenge. During the researchers' visit for lesson observation, it took close to 15 minutes for *Teacher B* to look for a vacant classroom. *Teacher C* at Nageng JSS went on to say that; "we who teach optional subjects fight for classes, no one wants to teach outdoors especially when the weather is bad like today".

Similarly, the challenge of shortage of books was echoed by both teachers and students at Boasa JSS. For instance, there were no core texts for Form 2's whilst the supplementary texts available were used as class sets. Teachers at Boas JSS reported that the school internet was never working due to poor network hence an over reliance on text books when searching for information. The students also noted that there was lack of reference material even in the library and that led to them failing to do some assigned tasks. Students said that they relied mainly on the information that the teachers gave to them in class. For example one student, Nametso at Boasa JSS said that when given homework there is nowhere to research for answers and as a result they would come back to class blank expecting the teacher to provide those answers for tasks that were meant to be done by students.

At Nageng JSS like other two schools, there was shortage of resources especially the core texts and computers as expressed by *Teacher D* that; "computers are not working at all and during computer lessons students stay in class and read". As such students could not do research on the internet to improve their understanding of the various concepts, and that classrooms were deemed inadequate.

### *Parental involvement*

Lack of parental involvement was identified as a major challenge at both Boasa and Maareng junior secondary schools. The Deputy School Head at Maareng JSS indicated that: "There is no support from parents. They do not show up for meetings or collect students reports". In addition to this, the PTA chairperson Ms Taba at Maareng JSS explained that for the past three years she only met Form 1 parents during orientation but not in subsequent terms and years, and that fewer parents attended meetings called by the PTA. Similarly, at Boasa JSS the PTA chairperson indicated that parents did not attend PTA meetings consistently. For example, according to the PTA minutes at Boasa JSS for the past five years, less than two hundred parents out of one thousand students attended a meeting each time it was called and that in one of the meetings, only one hundred and eighty five parents attended. The Deputy School Head reiterated

that; “We are not happy with parents’ involvement in the school affairs as it is not satisfactory”.

Contrary to what was happening at Boasa and Maareng secondary schools, at Nageng JSS parents were very supportive. For example, the Deputy School Head said, “Many parents bought their children the much needed books that are not available here at school. Again, the PTA executive is very active because they came up with various strategies on how to motivate the students such as awarding badges for best student of the month per subject, prize-giving and motivational talks at assemblies”.

#### *Teachers’ pedagogical skills and content knowledge*

During lesson observation the teachers varied their teaching techniques, such as question and answer, demonstration, class discussions and presentation and this attributed to lively classrooms and hence motivated the students. For instance, *Teacher E* at Boasa JSS used question and answer technique followed by presentations and discussions and pair work when introducing the topic on teachings about the responsibility of the rich towards the poor in Christianity and Islam and the teacher concluded the lesson by giving students a class exercise. At Nageng secondary school *Teacher C* taught the topic “*Personal and Social Identity*” (Botswana Government, 2008), and he started by brainstorming, question and answer followed by group discussions, group presentations and he ended the lesson by summarizing it through a brief lecture. At Maareng *Teacher B* used lecture, pair work and presentation when teaching about the “*Role of religion in society*”. He concluded with question and answer to check students’ understanding.

From the observations made, if the teachers continue varying their teaching methods and involving students, then learning could be fruitful and lead to improvement in students’ academic performance. It was observed that the student-centred techniques unearthed the abilities of learners since they actively participated during class proceedings, and in addition the classroom atmosphere was accommodative of the diverse contributions from students.

The religious jargon of the different religions posed a challenge to the teachers and students because naturally each religion has its own concepts and terminology. For instance, many students alluded that their parents were always willing to help them with their assignments but the challenge was that they lacked knowledge of world religions, apart from Christianity. At Nageng JSS, it surfaced that teachers were biased towards Christianity, as it was given more coverage and as a result other religious concepts were compromised as they were not given much time. To illustrate this, Theo, a student, said; “Our teacher is biased towards Christianity and always gives more examples from it but not much about other religions which makes it difficult for me to understand other religions.”

#### *Teacher-student ratio*

Teachers complained of large classes even though their subject was an option. For example, at Nageng JSS there were forty-five, thirty-five, and twenty-five Form 1, Form 2 and Form 3 students per class respectively, while at Boasa JSS there were forty-eight Form 1s, forty-five Form 2s, and forty Form 3s per class. However at Maareng JSS the RE classes were much smaller compared to the other two schools, with twenty-four Form 1s, thirty Form 2s and thirty-six Form 3s per class. These large classes can have an adverse impact in the teaching and learning because individual student attention by the teacher could be compromised and can also compromise the quality of marking scripts as well as delaying feedback to students.

### *In- service training*

Teachers mentioned lack of in-service training especially on the new syllabus as a challenge. At Boasa and Nageng secondary schools teachers indicated that though a new curriculum with its new approach was ushered in 2008 there were no workshops that were conducted to induct in the new syllabus and that affected their instructional delivery. For example, *Teacher F* at Nageng JSS said:

There was no in-service training offered by the Botswana Examinations Council to update us on the new system of marking and grading. We are just in the dark. The government will wait until teachers are about to retire and that is when they will be sent for further education.

### *Assessment skills of RE teachers*

Assessment is viewed as an on-going process that measures how much learners have understood a concept in relation to what would have been taught. Drawing from the students' exercise books across the forms, the assessment done in class indicates that questions were mainly from the *knowledge* domain as per Bloom's taxonomy. Here are examples of a revision exercise from different topics;

1. Mention two main features of mainline churches in Botswana.
2. Differentiate between doctrinal and experiential dimension.
3. Give two world religions found in Botswana.
4. Mention two ways in which people are exposed to world religions.

Based on the above questions it is evident that they are from one domain which is '*knowledge*' which is a low level cognitive domain. There is need for questions to be balanced in assessment to prepare students for what is expected of them in the examination. Nevertheless, from the topics that the teacher picked questions from, there were objectives that demanded high order cognitive skills such as *application* and *analysis* but they were not included in the assessment. For instance, the topic '*Christian denominations in Botswana*', the specific objective namely that the students should have "Explored the impact of the existence of many Christian denominations in Botswana" is an *application* objective which could have been included to balance the exercise. As for the end of month tests the assessment for the three schools which is done by a group of schools referred

to as 'cluster', covers more than one domain unlike class exercises, but still most of the questions are from the knowledge category. This is illustrated by a Form 3 end of month test where students were asked to attempt the following question;

1. a) Define the following terms (**Knowledge**)  
b) What are rites of passage? (**Knowledge**)
2. Case study questions
  - a) List rituals found in the case study above (**Knowledge**)
  - b) Outline three aspects that show the importance of birth rituals in Sikhism (**Comprehension**)
  - c) Briefly describe what happens during the sacred thread ceremony in Hinduism. (**Comprehension**)
3. Explain the significance of the following Hindu marriage rituals. (**Comprehension**)
4. Differentiate between the Bar Mitzvah and the Bat Mitzvah in Judaism. (**Knowledge**)
5. Interreligious marriages promote religious intolerance. Argue for or against this statement. (**Evaluation**)
6. Discuss the beliefs and customs about life after death in ATR in Botswana. (**Evaluation**)

From this test there are four knowledge questions, three comprehension and two evaluation questions, therefore the test was not balanced in terms of the testing of the cognitive domains. Application and synthesis are missing yet they play an important role in checking understanding of content. The challenge here is that teachers have not been trained in item writing as it surfaced from the interviews. At Nageng JSS, a teacher *Teacher G* complained; "We have never been trained in item writing, mostly we depend on past exam papers' standard and try to emulate that when we set tests and exams". Similarly, *Teacher E* at Boasa JSS, said that "Most of the time we take our questions from text books and past national examination papers". Hence teachers find themselves asking questions based on only one type of domain and unconsciously ignoring others.

#### *Students' attitudes towards learning RE*

Based on the findings of this study, the attitudes and study habits of most students towards learning of RE is positive. At Nageng JSS, the students always did their assigned homework and were very active in class presentations despite the lack of computers to do research from. This was confirmed by teacher *Teacher G* in saying that, "The students are really committed to their work because they always do assignments to my expectations". At Maareng JSS, the students also mentioned their love for the subject though they face challenges when assigned work as parents lack knowledge of RE. For example, Bame, a student at Maareng, reiterated that; "I like this subject very much but my challenge is that my parents cannot assist me in RE like other subjects because they do not understand it". Similarly, at Boasa JSS students would come back from home with work undone because they could not get help since there was no internet access and relevant textbooks. This was proven by Letso when she said, "I like RE that is why I chose it but the problem is that we do not have textbooks to refer to when given homework so we struggle".

Some students had negative attitudes and negative study habits towards learning RE. For instance, at Boasa JSS, some students had no interest in studying RE to a point where they did not do their assignments and even disturbed the classroom proceedings. This was reflected by Malebogo when she said; "I do not like the subject because there are no text books and I come back from home having not done my assignment". Also, Nonoyo said that; "There is too much disturbance in the RE class due to use of face book which hinders learning". This is an attitude to learning that can make learners see RE lessons as places where they misbehave thus not conducive for learning and as such they may lose interest in the subject leading to low academic performance.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of the study revealed that teachers have relevant qualifications, experience and knowledge of their subject area and as such adhere to the set standards of the RE. It surfaced that some religious jargons were a barrier to the effective teaching and learning of RE since teachers end up being biased towards Christianity to explain concepts in other religions because they are largely familiar with it. In addition, it was evident that teachers had limited skills in assessment especially in item writing since they could not balance all domains as is the expectation and this in turn had an impact in students' academic performance. The study also revealed that learner centred methods and techniques motivated learners as they became actively involved in the learning process and in that way enhancing their academic performance. It emerged that where there was positive, constant and consistent parental involvement the academic performance of the school in general was usually good. It can then be concluded that the cooperation and collaboration between the parents and the teachers is the key in improving academic results. In schools where parents are actively involved, the schools' academic performance is high whereas, in schools where parents are less involved, the results are low.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings the following recommendations were made:

- There has to be coordination between the two Ministry of Education departments namely the Department of Teacher Training & Development and the Department of Curriculum Development and Evaluation and the Botswana Examinations Council which is a parastatal organisation responsible for assessment in Botswana primary and secondary schools..
- In service training for RE teachers in the pedagogy of the revised multi-faith RE curriculum should be provided and has to be initiated by the supervising department which is the Department of Teacher Training & Development whilst the service is provided by the Department of Curriculum Development and Evaluation.
- Teachers need to balance the teaching of various religions rather than over-emphasising on Christianity.
- In service training for teachers in assessment should be provided in order to sensitize teachers about issues of assessment and in particular

to issues of setting tasks, marking and grading them. The Department of Teacher Training & Development should initiate the move whilst the service should be provided by the Botswana Examinations Council.

- Teacher pupil ratio should be revisited by the MOE so as to balance it with staff and resources, in order to enhance attention for individual students.

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