

# The Path so Far: Introducing Moral Education in Botswana Senior Secondary Schools

Baamphatlha Dinama<sup>1</sup>  
Department of Languages and Social Sciences Education  
Faculty of Education  
University of Botswana  
[dinamab@mopipi.ub.bw](mailto:dinamab@mopipi.ub.bw)

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## Abstract

This study investigated the classroom practices of moral education (ME) teachers in three (3) of the ten (10) Botswana senior secondary schools that are piloting the curriculum. The aim of the study was to gain insight into classroom practices and the challenges that moral education teachers face when implementing a new curriculum. Interviews and classroom observations were used to collect data from five (5) participants who were purposively sampled. The results suggest that teachers have a positive attitude towards the subject despite the challenges faced in implementing the new curriculum. This study finds that it is not always easy for moral education teachers to methodically follow a particular approach or approaches in teaching moral education, as per the expectations of the curriculum, since they are generally not sure which ones are the most appropriate. The findings of this study may be of use to curriculum planners, policy makers, teachers and researchers in education in their efforts to better understand the thinking and practices of teachers in classrooms.

**Keywords:** Curriculum; Moral education; Values clarification; Moral reasoning; Classroom practices; Morality; School culture

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## INTRODUCTION

Teaching moral education (ME) in public schools is a daunting task and is often influenced by a number of factors. The key players in ME teaching and learning are the teachers whose practices undoubtedly affect students' internalisation of the subject. Moral education in the Botswana education system was first introduced as a subject in 1999 in junior secondary schools and in 2010 in senior secondary schools. It was introduced as a result of the Revised National Policy on Education (Botswana Government, 1994) that recommended the separation of ME from Religious Education. For a long time religious education and moral education in Botswana public schools has been taught as a single subject called religious and moral education given that religion was viewed as the source of morality. Consequently, in the past the Religious and Moral Education curriculum was inclined towards religion and particularly to Christianity, a legacy inherited from Britain, a former colonial "master" of present-day Botswana, bent on instilling Christian values in all of its subjects. The secular world-views that pervade contemporary society and are largely a result of liberal thinking, have however rendered religion suspect and necessitated the introduction of religious-free ME. Public schools are furthermore thought of as liberal democratic institutions that maintain and promote liberal values (Levinson, 1999) and should not adhere to any particular religion.

The ME curriculum in Botswana draws its content from several contemporary moral issues and three approaches have been suggested for its implementation: values clarification, moral reasoning, and value neutrality (Botswana Government, 2007, 1999). As a school subject, ME is deemed relevant given the decline in social capital in terms of apathy to certain national issues such as citizenship, the loosening of family and community bonds, and a declining sense of trust among people (Turiel, 2002).

### CONCEPTUALISING MORAL EDUCATION

Many countries, especially the West and their former colonies, have adopted a liberal type of education whereby reason rather than tradition is viewed as the premise and criterion for measuring good and bad. Botswana, a former British colony, has adopted a form of ME that is based on liberal thinking and is aimed at educating both mind and heart. Its emphasis is on logical moral thinking that can be learned and internalised by students in order to analyse moral issues in a consistent and logical manner. Nonetheless, it is not easy to define ME, especially since it emanates from virtues and moral values which are abstract in nature.

Turiel (1986) notes that morals refer to “prescriptive judgements of justice, rights and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other. Moral prescriptions are not relative to the social context, nor are they defined by it” (p.3). Nucci (2001) makes a clear distinction between morality and social conventions or norms by indicating that:

*“moral issues are viewed to be independent of the existence of social norms and generalisable across contexts, societies and cultures. Social conventions ... are rule dependent, and their normative force holds only within the social system within which the rule was formed. ... Judgements of moral issues are justified in terms of the harm or unfairness that actions would cause, while judgements of convention are justified in terms of norms and expectations of authority” p.9 (emphasis added).*

Morals are attributes that a group acquires in order to facilitate the distinctions between right and wrong in people’s conduct. Morals include principles, standards and habits of behaviour that are applicable to these distinctions and are regarded as desirable or important and are held in high esteem by the society in which one lives in. In a diverse and multicultural society there will undoubtedly arise disagreements in interpreting social conventions, norms and traditions in terms of those that are most desirable and those that are not. Morality pervades every aspect of people’s lives and is not only embedded in abstract ideas, but in the everyday lived realities of people as they engage in relationships in their social practices. Despite the pervasiveness of morality (good or bad), educating students in ME is a challenge largely because the subject does not guarantee that students will become morally just persons guided by the principle of the common good.

### What Moral Education Aims to Achieve

Even though it is not easy to define, even when offered as a school subject, ME aims to help children acquire those virtues or moral habits that allow them to live “good” lives and become productive, contributing members of a socially cohesive community. It provides students with basic cultural literacy and introduces students to their cultural traditions while shaping their moral identities. In a liberal environment, the task of ME then is to provide students with the intellectual skills that will enable them to make informed and responsible decisions about issues deemed to be of moral importance. ME also aims to promote in students a sense of deep concern for the well-being of others and the nation. It should be noted here that there is no marked agreement on the place of morality in education, since a variety of opinions are still held on the general aims of education.

In educating students it is important to know what should have been accomplished upon completion of their educational cycle. One of the main challenges with ME, as with other subject areas, is that what parents prefer for children to learn and what schools teach may differ a great deal. Additionally, ME is charged with two often very different tasks. One is to nurture children, through socialization and training into the virtues and values that are believed to make them good citizens (Ryan, 1986). The other is to enable mature students to become informed of and reflective about important and controversial moral issues while helping them to make sense of what it means to be human. Given different understandings of morality and ME, the subject has taken on different forms and names depending on the country in which it is offered. Values education, human rights education, citizenship education, character education, civic education and personal and social education are some forms of moral education (Fataar & Solomons, 2011).

## **Moral Education and School Culture**

Schools inherently teach morality, whether implicitly or explicitly, by conveying to students what is expected of them in terms of what is normal, right, wrong, good and bad. It is thus uncontroversial that schooling is a moral enterprise. Schools have a moral ethos embodied in rules, rewards and punishments, dress codes, student government, relationships, styles of teaching, and the kind of respect accorded to students and teachers (Ryan, 1986). This prepares students to enter the public sphere of citizenship by teaching them how to adjust their primary individual identities so as to assume a secondary identity of citizens of a state. However, despite the many informal ways in which children learn morality in school, there are a limited number of methods for formal moral education.

## **APPROACHES TO MORAL EDUCATION**

Although there is still some debate on approaches to teaching ME, based mostly on disagreement over sources of morality and moral authority, values clarification, value transmission, moral reasoning, and value neutrality are some of the most commonly adopted approaches. Botswana has adopted values clarification, value neutrality and moral reasoning.

### **Values Clarification**

With the values clarification approach, teaching is based on the assumption that there is value in holding clear views and acting on them and that there are no correct answers to ethical dilemmas. Teachers are expected to help students reflect on what they value and come up with independent conclusions, which involve the three stages of choosing, prizing and acting (Straughan, 2000). The teacher is expected to lead students in discussing controversial issues while engaging them in moral arguments as a way of assisting them to make judgments, choices and decisions (moral reasoning) that are informed by the values they cherish.

In this approach, students choose their values from an array of values relative to their life's experiences. This approach is not concerned with the content of people's values since they hold different personal values but with the process of valuing. Likewise, it is not focused on the transmission of any set of values since according to the approach there are no absolute universal values. Here, a value is understood as that which results from a free choice among alternatives and after thoughtful consideration of the consequences of making such a choice. It is important that students are happy with the choice of values made and act in accordance with their choice. The role of the teacher is that of a facilitator who is neutral by not presenting his or her views as the right ones (Straughan, 2000) and not providing authoritative answers during the discussion (Ryan, 1986).

Though it has been a popular approach for some time and in many countries, there are three concerns around values clarification that warrant discussion. First, the approach is relative in nature since it relativizes moral values (Standish, 1996, Kohlberg, 1975, Lipe, [n.d]). The approach does not differentiate between matters of personal taste and what Lipe (n.d) refers to as 'objective morality,' and hence can be used to justify any and every position and act. Similarly, there is no one way in which the approach attempts to resolve value conflict among different parties. Second, this approach is less than adequate in that it lacks a consensus on the definition of values (Kohlberg, 1975, Lipe, [n.d]). Third, this approach tends towards superficiality in that it deals with issues that are often personal and assumes that becoming more self-aware about one's values is an end in itself (Kohlberg, 1975).

### **Neutrality in Moral Education**

Value neutrality can be seen as an approach in itself or can be embedded in other approaches such as values clarification and moral reasoning. Neutrality is a central value in the western liberal tradition (Gordon, 1978). Teachers are expected to be free of bias and should set aside their opinions, feelings and agendas to encourage students to express themselves on an issue without inhibition. Neutrality promotes lack of commitment to either side while aiming at establishing trust, credibility and respect among students. Teachers are expected to act as neutral chairpersons of classroom discussions and should not use their power of authority to promote their own opinions. The assumption is that if teachers were to make their values known, it might prevent students from establishing personal values for themselves. However, students do need the assistance and encouragement of teachers for them to advance toward higher forms of moral thought (Bricker, 1972).

Neutrality as an approach faces several challenges in terms of application. For example, a teacher may hesitate in values discussion and ultimately remain neutral even with controversial and highly charged issues. Similarly, the teacher

may choose not to comment even where students show signs of misinformation (Ryan, 1986; Smith, 2011). The undeniable authority role of teachers poses another challenge, as teachers in some way still retain their influence as they set up, guide and conclude classroom morality discussions. The teacher-student relationship is necessarily unequal in terms of the roles and responsibilities that each assumes (Cotton, 2006; Maiese, 2005). With this approach, in the right circumstances it may be possible for the teacher to intervene in the substance of the dispute but remain disinterested in the outcome (Maiese, 2005). Finally, if teachers always adopt a neutral and detached stance that in itself might lead their students to think that the matters under discussion are unimportant and are meant to be just an intellectual exercise that is divorced from life experiences.

### **Moral Reasoning**

Moral reasoning is one of the approaches used in Botswana schools. It was developed by Jean Piaget and popularised by Lawrence Kohlberg (Straughan, 2000; Kohlberg, 1987, 1975). In this approach, morality is based on universal human concern and the principle of fairness, justice, equality and reciprocity (Kohlberg, 1975). Students are taught the principles of moral reasoning based on moral concepts that involve one's intentions and how one understands them in relation to their actions (Kohlberg, 1987). This approach discourages what Bricker (1972) refers to as a "teacher's uncritical sermonising about his own personal values" (p. 619). Teachers should engage students intellectually and emotionally through discussion and solving hypothetical moral issues and dilemmas in order to help children reach higher stages of moral thinking (Paisey, Kobayashi & Li, 2007; Straughan, 2000; Kohlberg, 1987, 1975). This is done because it has been found that moral thought goes through a predictable sequence of developmental stages (Kohlberg, 1975). Throughout this process, students are assisted by teachers who play a crucial role by listening closely in order to understand students' reasoning and then helping them to move to the next level of reasoning. Since the approach is based on the principles of justice and fairness in society, the discussions are expected to stress the importance of operating as moral agents in our communities.

There are two major concerns with this approach. First, it is confined to the lower stages of cognitive moral development and, second it is heavy on theory and light on classroom application (Ryan, 1986). A third challenge can emerge around the skills that teachers require in order to meaningfully involve students in such discussions. Teachers are expected to strike a delicate balance between letting students make decisions and showing them the limits of their reasoning. According to Bricker (1972), "if students are to be emotionally involved in the moral issues they discuss in class, their teachers need to show them how" (p. 621). The teacher is not, however, concerned with the right or wrong of what the students say or with the decisions they reach.

### **Key Research Questions**

In view of the literature discussed here, the objective of this study is to investigate the approaches that ME teachers use to teach ME in Botswana public schools. The following two key research questions guided the study.

- A. What approaches do Moral Education teachers use in their classrooms?
- B. How do Moral Education teachers use the prescribed approaches in teaching Moral Education?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative interpretivist approach to study the practices of Moral Education teachers in three senior secondary schools in Botswana (two in an urban and one in a peri-urban area). In qualitative research, studies are undertaken in the natural setting of the participants (Siegle, 2009; Best & Khan, 2006). The context is important because human behaviour is at the centre of this type of research and the acquired knowledge and reality have meaning within a given context (Burns & Grove 1993; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). This approach is based on how people make sense of their lived experiences (Merriam, 1988). In this methodology, the researcher seeks to understand human and social behaviour from an insider's perspective (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 1990). Birmingham (2003) says that "each culture that a teacher faces calls for different understandings and different responses" (p. 188). The classroom, inhabited by students and teachers, is undoubtedly a unique communicative context that is different from other settings (Frank & Uy, 2004).

Interviews and observations were used as the data collection methods. Through the interviews, I was able to probe deeply into the thoughts and utterances of the participants and to uncover previously unknown details since the participants were encouraged to talk freely. I was also able to listen to the teachers' voices, concerns, complaints and confusions about implementing the ME curriculum. As I listened, I enquired systematically into their classroom experiences, in terms of pedagogical reflections on their practices. The information gathered from the interviews was cumulative, in that each interview built on and connected with the previous one. Throughout the interviews, I attempted to adopt an empathic and vicarious understanding of the teachers' experiences by being open, sensitive and aware of their diverse cultural settings.

Classroom observations were carried out in order to assess firsthand how ME was taught and subsequently compare this to the statements made by participants in the interviews. Observations were carried out twice in a week in lessons that lasted for one hour and twenty minutes referred to as a "double period". In part because of the observations, my interpretation of the data was based on participants' own understanding of their world. Furthermore, it is important that the data is credible in terms of its authenticity and trustworthiness (Patton, 2002) and is context-based. In addition to the interviews and observations, I made frequent field notes of occurrences both in and outside the classroom, including casual conversations and other similar events that may have had a bearing on the study. Field notes, interviews and observations complemented each other by closing the gaps where one method or perspective may have been lacking. Interviews and observations provided a rich, comprehensive, well-developed and robust account of the phenomenon under study in terms of data corroboration.

Participants included five (5) Moral Education teachers in three senior secondary schools. Four of the teachers were from two schools in an urban area while one was from a school in a peri-urban area. The three schools were chosen because they offered ME on a pilot basis. I purposefully sampled participants whom I was convinced would offer rich data. Patton (2002) says that purposive sampling is "information rich and illuminative" (p. 40) in terms of giving insight into a phenomenon as rich information is provided by those who manifest characteristics of interest to the researcher (Best & Kahn, 2006). The sampled teachers satisfied the study's requirements in terms of my expectations around their professional qualifications and experiences.

The five teachers who participated in the study had more than eight years teaching experience. Four of them had taught moral education in junior secondary schools before being transferred to senior secondary schools. Three of them trained as moral education teachers at colleges of education before pursuing a degree at the University of Botswana. The other two completed degrees in Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Botswana as well as a post graduate diplomas in Education, with a specialization in religious education (RE). These latter two were posted to junior secondary schools when ME was first introduced in 1999 and have taught the subject since then. When ME was first introduced in Botswana secondary schools, there were no trained ME specialists and often RE teachers, including the two in this study, were asked to teach ME because RE was seen as the closest subject to ME.

In order to protect their identities, the participants and the schools in this study were given the following pseudo names: Ms. Katse and Ms. Baliki from Bakang Secondary School, Ms. Masa and Ms. Ramose from Seko Secondary School, and Ms. Kgori from Chaba Secondary School. After explaining the objectives of the study to potential participants, they were asked to provide a written informed consent form. I informed the participants that they could withdraw from the study anytime without suffering any prejudice for doing so.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Approaches to Moral Education**

In order to better understand the practices of ME teachers, I asked about their classroom activities in relation to the requirements of the curriculum. All five noted that they adopted a neutral stance and generally used group discussions, which were followed by presentations, lectures and individual work. Ms. Baliki indicated that her techniques satisfied the demands of the curriculum in particular because she managed to cater to the mixed abilities of groups by giving all students an opportunity to be actively involved in the learning process. She did, however, acknowledge that in most cases she was forced to lecture in order to cover more content quickly. Ms. Masa likewise employed several teaching techniques and approaches and did not offer specific answers to issues raised by students in hope that they would eventually arrive at their own conclusions. She did not detail the steps she took to enable students to autonomously make moral decisions and in this way left open the question of whether or not students were equipped to make informed decisions and conclusions to guide their actions.

The other teachers identified similar approaches. Ms. Kgori noted that during discussions she would guide the students but refrain from expressing her views on an issue. Given the neutrality sought by the five teachers, they were clearly uncomfortable making their personal views known to students. Ms. Katse did however note that when acting in a different capacity (when not explicitly teaching ME), for example when offering counselling to students, she opened up and expressed her personal opinions.

*Ms. Katse: It is only in situations where I have to give counseling to a particular student that I show her right and wrong and hence influence the decisions the student may take.*

During the observations, I found that often the intellectually gifted students participated most fully and tended to dominate class discussions while those who were less intellectually capable had less to contribute. The more advanced students also appeared more able to ask for clarification when they do not fully understand a concept or discussion. As with other subjects, it is possible that the students who struggled to participate may feel inadequate and thus may develop low self-esteem, something that ME is explicitly attempting to avoid. Further, I observed that pedagogical techniques such as debate and group work which are meant to empower students as well as measure their understanding and their internalisation of concepts were used only sparingly. One additional challenge for most students was the use of English as the language of instruction. English is a second language for some and a third language for others often making it difficult for them to express and discuss complex concepts.

### **Use of Prescribed Approaches**

In terms of the prescribed approaches to teaching ME, participating teachers were on the whole the centres of learning since they were the main providers of information. There were few activities that were student-centred and capable of developing students' intellectual curiosity. An over-use of lecturing was seen to derail the democratic, participatory and enquiry-based learning expected in an ME class. This may have been the result of inadequate content knowledge and pedagogical skills as these relate to how groups work, what tasks to give in big classes, what questions to ask and how to pose them. Teachers also failed to alter, adjust or change their instruction to respond to the context.

It is important to note, however, that teachers faced a number of environmental or structural limitations. The student-teacher ratio of forty to one made it difficult for teachers to assist many of the students in their classes. In all of the observed classes, teachers were often stuck at the front of the room because there was no space for them to move about freely given the overcrowding of students. In some cases, the lack of physical space prevented teachers from using group work as a teaching tool. This may have contributed to the aforementioned teacher-centred techniques.

Though good teaching is the aim of all teachers, there are many factors that contribute to success or failure. The teachers in this study highlighted several of the challenges they have encountered in teaching the newly introduced ME in senior secondary schools. Ms. Masa noted that, "even though there are few topics, the objectives are too many in each topic". Ms. Katse, and several of the other participants, indicated that they struggled to get teaching and learning materials and so formed clusters in their inspectorate region in which they could discuss topics that are problematic and share teaching notes. Though other teachers did not raise it as a concern, Ms. Kgori did suggest that the ME teaching staff in her school were inadequate.

Although all five were aware of the aims of ME, they were divided in their opinions on its positive effects on the behaviours of students. As a subject dealing with morality, ME is expected to help alter the moral behaviour of students for the "better" in terms of promoting a sense of respect for each other and a deep concern for the well-being of others.

*Ms. Kgori: The subject moulds students into better people and promotes assertiveness in students. They don't come out of class the same. It has an impact on the way students behave.*

*Ms. Katse: Moral Education does change students in terms of the way they think, and even on how they relate with others. Students tend to learn and know themselves better.*

Ms. Ramose, however, observed that it was difficult to tell if the subject had any impact on student behaviour since there has not been any tracking of ME graduates. She postulated that the information about moral issues that was conveyed to students is likely to affect their behaviour and attitudes positively and hence they could end up making informed decisions when confronted with moral issues. Ms. Masa was uncomfortable with the different moral issues that students were exposed to, since they had the potential to bring about what she referred to as "moral confusion" amongst students.

Ms. Masa: *Look at topics such as "Abortion" and "Capital punishment" and their advantages and disadvantages.*

Ms. Baliki, Ms. Katse and Ms. Masa were of the view that ME should be a compulsory subject in public senior schools and even beyond. All three felt that it should not be limited to the classroom where the emphasis is on passing the examination rather than developing the affective aspects of moral understanding. Ms. Baliki further theorized that ME could only have a positive effect on students if teachers were moral exemplars who "lived by the virtues they profess". She argued that for students to be virtuous, teachers need to practice virtuous acts that students could emulate. This is a common school of thought in the values transmission approach to ME which is not one of the recommended approaches in Botswana because it has been associated with indoctrination.

### **Training of the Teachers**

The participants had different perspectives about the role played by teacher training institutions. Ms. Baliki felt that diploma-granting colleges of education equipped teacher trainees with the skills needed to implement the ME curriculum. Ms. Baliki: *The courses offered had the content relevant for the delivery of the subject.*

Ms. Masa, who initially trained at a teachers' college, concurred with Ms. Baliki's assertion that the courses offered at colleges of education were comparable to university-based programmes. In her university experience, she was surprised to find that her courses were offered in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies (Faculty of Humanities) rather than the Faculty of Education as she would have expected. The inadequacy of university degree courses was further emphasised by Ms. Kgori.

Ms. Kgori: *Even though I possess a degree right now I am using my diploma qualification to teach.*

Ms. Masa also shared the view that the programmes offered at teacher training colleges were superior to those offered at universities. Teachers further indicated that there was no in-service training for ME teachers and no workshops through which teachers could be brought together to share ideas and experiences.

### **CONCLUSION**

Despite the several available approaches for teaching ME in Botswana secondary school, it was difficult to identify the use of any particular approach other than neutrality. It was also unclear whether teachers were equipped to use various prescribed approaches. The findings show that the practices of Moral Education teachers were challenged in several ways. Many of the suggested approaches and techniques were perceived to be too time-consuming for the limited classroom time allocated to the subject.

Though ME teachers were expected to use student-centred techniques, their lessons were largely teacher dominated often because of a competing emphasis on content coverage. Student understanding and critical thinking, which are central components of ME, were thus compromised. It was difficult to determine if teachers adequately assisted students in reaching a stage where they made independent and autonomous decisions as outlined in the expectations of the subject. While teachers did aspire to promote both the affective and academic aspects of ME, it was often only the examination inclined cognitive component that was emphasised. This routine was at times broken by scant and sporadic group-directed tasks. Faced with an examination-oriented curriculum, teacher-centred techniques and tasks usually won out over group or student-centered tasks. As a result it was unclear whether students were able to develop and defend their own conjectures in terms of disciplined reasoning and problem solving.

Teachers were eager to teach the subject effectively despite a number of challenges including inadequate pedagogical knowledge, limited time to teach and complete the curriculum, and inadequate resources. The large numbers of students in each class also posed a problem since this hindered the use of techniques such as group work and debate which are considered especially relevant in ME. Teachers consequently adopted the lecture technique and not all students were equally accounted for in this type of teaching, particularly those who were less intellectually able. Those students who were proficient in English appeared to benefit more from the subject since they were articulate when expressing their views both in writing and in speaking.

Teachers were generally of the view that ME is capable of positively affecting the behaviours of students even though there is no evidence to date to support this conjecture. It is also not clear whether teachers were able to identify the

stages of moral development and 'catapult' and stimulate their students to a higher level of cognitive moral understanding. Many of the prescribed approaches feasibly challenged teachers' accustomed and traditional ways of teaching, which may have been the reason for the over reliance on the lecture technique.

### Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have several implications. Among them, teachers will need to change their approaches to teaching ME, especially those who may still be using value transmission approaches. They may be assisted in this through workshops designed to expose them to more student-centred teaching approaches. Training institutions may also need to change their curriculum so as to better incorporate the desired teaching approaches.

### Recommendations

1. Educators and policy makers should empower ME teachers by organizing workshops that stress relevant approaches, especially those supported by current research findings.
2. Teacher training institutions should revise their curriculum to incorporate current and effective approaches for teaching ME in Botswana public schools.
3. There is a need for a longitudinal study aimed at capturing teachers' experiences over a period of time.

### Limitations of the Study

The participants were all female and the study was concentrated in urban and peri-urban areas. An analysis of the teaching documents used by teachers may have added value to this study.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Baamphatla Dinama is a lecturer at the University of Botswana. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Pretoria in education policy and his PhD thesis is entitled: Implementing a multi-faith Religious Education curriculum in Botswana Schools. He also holds M.Ed. degree from the University of Wales (Cardiff), a B.A. degree and a Postgraduate Diploma in Education from the University of Botswana. He taught at junior and senior secondary schools and teacher training colleges in Botswana. He is presently offering Religious Education and Moral Education courses at the university of Botswana and is a coordinator of an undergraduate research course in the Department of Languages and Social Sciences Education (University of Botswana). In addition, he teaches and supervises masters students in their research projects. His research interests are education policy and multi-cultural education. He has published Religious Education textbooks for secondary school students.