

Chapter 16

Developing Essential Values through Traditional Tales: Voices of Malawian Primary School Teachers

Imran Mogra, Birmingham City University, UK

Abstract

Stories are intrinsically linked with religious traditions and moral education. Most, if not all, scriptures among the major religious traditions contain stories of faith, virtues, and morals and all religious figures like Buddha, Guru Nanak, Jesus, Moses and Muhammad used them for a range of purposes. In the field of education, the versatility of stories, both religious and cultural, is almost universally accepted. This chapter is based on research carried out among twelve primary schools teachers in Nkhosakota, Malawi. The aims included an exploration of their views about Religious and Moral Education (RME), and the significance they attached to traditional stories for RME. In the context of storytelling, the study also gained insights into the nature of their curriculum and the pedagogical approaches they applied.

Introduction

Humans, at their heart, are both tellers and seekers of stories. No sooner do they awake, they begin narrating stories – some mundane, others profound. Simultaneously, they listen to stories from others. Stories are also grounded and intrinsically linked with religious traditions and moral education. Most, if not all, scriptures among the major religious traditions contain stories of faith, virtues and morals. In addition, stories were used by almost all religious figures like Buddha, Guru Nanak, Jesus and Muhammad (ﷺ) and others for a range of purposes. In turn, they generated stories about themselves to record their life events, wise words, miracles, worship and social dealings. The versatility of religious and secular stories allows a storyteller to imagine many different voices within them, and to adopt manifold pedagogies (see Conroy *et al.*, 2013).

In the field of education, the role of stories is almost universally accepted. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the stories exist as part of the nurturing and educational process of children in both oral and literate communities. In other words, to paraphrase Bruner, humans live in ‘a sea of stories’ (Bruner, 1996: 147). As educational tools, stories are considered to be effective as they are believable, memorable, and entertaining. However, in addition to the academic and aesthetic value of stories, they can be instruments of transformation; spiritually and morally. Bruner and others explained that stories develop the landscape of action and consciousness, and have a key role in moral and religious education (see Bruner, 1996; Felderhof and Thompson, 2014; Eade, 2016). In Zambian ‘Chewa culture’ (*mwambo wa a Chewa*) and ‘Chewa education’ (*maphunziro ya Uchewa*), folklore is used to influence the minds of the young and to criticise, commend, dislike, admire, discard and adapt various traits in people (Banda and Morgan, 2013: 202).

In light of the above theoretical perspectives, this chapter presents responses from a sample of primary school teachers based in a rural village in Nkhosakota district in the central region of Malawi. This study explored the view of these teachers regarding: Religious and Moral Education (RME), the significance of traditional stories in religious and moral education, the stories used, and the pedagogical features applied. This research is significant as it highlights a hitherto less known nature of universal core values being taught in these remote but rapidly changing pluralistic

towns. Based on the findings of the study, in the context of Malawi, further research has been identified, and the implications of using stories in RME made. Before considering the research, it is essential to be acquainted with Malawi.

Malawi, a country situated in the east-central part of Africa, was formerly a British Protectorate named Nyasaland (1891–1964). Geographically, it is a narrow landlocked strip with its own lake. Politically, Malawi had been under British colonial rule until it became a protectorate in 1953. Eventually, it gained independence in 1964 to become a republic in 1966. Immediately after independence, its first president, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda (1898–1997), a Christian Presbyterian in the Scottish tradition, instated upon himself the presidency of the country. He later declared himself a life president, which resulted in a dictatorial rule until the first multiparty democracy in 1994 (McCracken, 2012). As a democratic state, constitutionally, the country has no state religion and under the law, freedom of religion and worship are guaranteed (Matemba, 2009). In Malawi, this means there is no prohibition on establishing places of worship, and faith-based educational, cultural and welfare institutions. Malawians belong to several diverse ethnic groups, and speak a variety of languages, though Chichewa is the national language and English, the official. The Chewa, Tumbuka, Yao and Ngoni are some of Malawi's ethnic and tribal groups (Power, 2010).

Religions and beliefs in Malawi

Demographically, in terms of religious affiliation, Malawi is multi-faith in its composition, with people belonging to diverse religious and traditional communities. Recent statistics show that there were 17,563,749 million usual residents, of whom 3.0 million (17.2%) were Roman Catholics, 2.5 million (14.2%) belonged to Church of Central African Presbyterian (CCAP), 2.4 million (13.8%) were Muslims, 1.6 million (9.4%) were Seventh Day Adventist/Baptist/Apostolic, 4.7 million (26.6%) were other Christian denominations, 5.6% were populations with other non-Christian denominations and 0.4 million (2.1%) had no religion (National Statistical Office, 2019). As the two main national traditions and key stakeholders in the context of RME, it is pertinent to briefly consider Christianity and Islam to highlight some of the contested issues.

Christianity

To understand the provision of RME in Malawi requires consideration of several significant factors which have had an indirect impact on the organisation and provision of the subject. The case of Malawi is not too dissimilar from that of many other countries, which were subjected to colonial rule (Simuchimba, 2001). Missionaries established a network of schools promoting 'Western' education, and pioneered medical and health care services by constructing clinics and hospitals. Unlike Islam and traditional religions, Christianity grew up in close association with colonialism (Jarhall, 2001).

Christianity was brought to Malawi in 1895 by David Livingstone, a Scottish missionary and explorer who passed by this country. As is the case with most Christian missionary groups, the Scottish Presbyterian Churches established the initial Christian centres in the country. In tracing the historical development of RME, Matemba (2013) notes:

Until 1929, when the colonial government (set up in 1891) took more control of education, schools operated by Presbyterian missionaries in Malawi offered a typically Scottish curriculum and, in particular, during that time, RE (a key school subject) was taught using a Presbyterian confessional mode (Matemba, 2013: 366–367).

Over the years, this Christian missionary heritage has continued to influence and play a significant role in the nature of RME being offered to Malawians across all regions, as detailed further below.

Islam

The arrival of Islam in Malawi predates Christianity. Some have suggested that Islam arrived about 150-180 years ago from the Swahili coast of East Africa (Mphande, 2014). However, Fattani (2018) thinks it was in 1506 when Muslim traders came in from Nsanje, in the south, using the Shire River from Mozambique. The accounts of the famous Muslim explorer Ibn Battutah (1304–1369) and Hall’s history of the Indian Ocean indicate the possibility of this (Hall, 1996). Significantly, Msiska notes it was there in the 8th – 9th century AD (Msiska, 1995).

Muslims are found in all parts of the country, although in certain districts around Lake Malawi, they are in the majority. In at least three places, Muslim influence existed prior to the advent of Christianity; Nkhotakota on the central west; contemporary Karonga, in the north, and in Mangochi, at the southern end of the Lake (Mphande, 2014). In democratic Malawi, Muslims found more freedom and confidence to express themselves in public, leading to the revival of Islam in many parts of the country. Asian Muslim communities settled in Malawi over a century ago and, more recently, Muslims from other parts of the world are present. These changes have further exposed Malawian Muslims to be part of a global Islamic community (*Ummah*) (Sicard, 2000).

Traditional Islamic education antedates Western style schooling in Malawi. Mphande has observed that Muslims arriving in the region “were conspicuous for the boards they carried for the teaching of the Quran” (Mphande, 2014: 132). The first Malawian chiefs to be converted were drawn to Islam for the literacy in Swahili. Mphande (2014) also notes that pioneer Christian missionaries found the Qur’ān being taught in *madrasahs* in several towns like Mangochi, Nkhotakota and Mponda. The setting up of a system for *madrasah* education contributed to the spread and consolidation of Islam. For contemporary Muslims, the provision of this faith-based education is significant for spiritual, moral and social development, and as such, Muslims have some concerns, such as cultural alienation, the engendering of different worldview and unequal treatment, as explained further below (Launay, 2016).

In relation to RME, it can be challenging to do full justice to specific Malawian Islamic traditions within British models for RE. As such, both communities may remain unsatisfied and it may result in Islam being described “in such a way that what implicitly is said to Malawian Muslims is that they are untypical or bad Muslims” (Jarhall, 2001: 5). Prior to 1994, Muslims could be excluded from a school on religious grounds (Nkhoma, 2019). In some Church-controlled schools, overzealous Bible-Knowledge (BK) teachers are reported to say unkind things about Islam (Matemba, 2013). Indeed, purveyors of Islam have converted many Malawians. However, in Tonga society, like in other societies of Malawi, Islam interfered less with people’s traditional beliefs and customs as the religion only made slight changes “to some of the local customs, thus integrating, assimilating and preserving vital indigenous elements” (Mphande, 2014: 136). Dicks witnessed the ways the Yawo of Malawi view the world. They are predominantly Muslim, but many keep strong links with their traditional religion (Dicks, 2012). As a largely oral society, they use oral literature to teach and strengthen their beliefs and practices. They use myths, proverbs, proverbial stories, songs of advice and prayers at various stages of the life cycle including at initiation events (Dicks, 2012).

African Traditional Religions

In the discussion about RME in Malawi, it is important to note that some think that the term ‘African Religion’ should be used for African Traditional Religions (ATR), as it is increasingly becoming more favoured among some scholars, and for the negative connotation that the word ‘traditional’ has (Sookrajh and Salanjira, 2009). The application of African Religion to all respective countries in Africa could be problematic as it may not capture the particularities of the vast continent and implies homogeneity. Nevertheless, in Malawi the term African Traditional Religions (ATR) is commonly used in schools.

Traditional religion continues to be relevant in Malawi. It is important to recognise the heterogeneous nature of the beliefs and rituals within the different tribes, while also appreciating the many similarities that will exist between them; not only in Malawi, but in other countries in Africa as well. Mlenga (2016), in an ethnographic and phenomenological study among the Ngonde people of Karonga in Malawi, found that the people had strong beliefs in spirits and that these spirits’ continued involvement in their lives. They believed in a supreme God (called Mulungu) long before the arrival of Europeans. God is accessed through the ancestors. They also believe in the continued existence of the dead and their influence of both the living and dead over their offspring. It is also believed by some that when a person dies, the spirit migrates to the land of the spirits and can return and affect the living. Witchcraft features as part of their cosmology, and traditional healing and use of traditional medicine is common. There are taboos related to matters of death, corpses, sacred persons, sexuality and incest which are aimed at preserving and prolonging life. There is a taboo in using the name of God as well as the chief unnecessarily. There are rituals for rain calling and drought averting, and for transition periods such as menstruation. Pregnancy is highly valued. There are also cult communities in some parts of Malawi (Power, 2010).

Amanze (2002) studied the Bimbi cult, and showed that from the viewpoint of religion, the cult had an intricate system of agricultural rituals such as rainmaking ceremonies. They also had a distinctive unwritten theology, with elaborate liturgical observances and an organised and inherited priesthood (Amanze, 2002). In addition, Amanze found that traditional beliefs and practices continued to influence some people in the countryside, whose livelihood depended on agricultural and upon the mercy of natural forces. He maintained that these ecological forces would persist in impacting their understanding of God, themselves, and their worldview (Amanze, 2002).

Religious education: Provision, reforms and issues

In government run primary schools, RME is mandatory, with no opt-out provision, whereas, in public secondary schools, it can be studied as an elective. The aim, as per the country’s constitution, is to eliminate religious intolerance (Malawi Government, 1994). However, historically, RE has had an explicit Christian agenda of proselytization in Malawian schools, and, like other RE in sub-Saharan Africa, it has had a long lasting impact on people’s socio-religious lifeworld (Matemba, 2011a). In such a context, Matemba noted that the teaching and learning of diverse religious and indigenous traditions, and how to achieve this most suitably, while recognising the primacy of Christianity in RME, continues to be disputed (Matemba, 2009).

It is also important to recognise the nature and relationship between religious education and moral education in the Global South. For instance, in several countries of Africa, moral education is presented as a subset of other curricular subjects, such as religious and moral education in (Malawi) (Matemba, 2009), spiritual and moral education in Zambia (Simuchimba, 2001), and life orientation in South Africa (Van Deventer, 2009). This would suggest that an overlap between the aims and purposes of these subjects is inevitable. Some teachers are also not

specialists, which is an important feature to acknowledge, since the epistemology and skills of teachers who teach a subject determines the status and practice of that subject (Van Deventer, 2009). Therefore, there may be a perception of tensions between the aims and status of these subjects. However, in the context of Africa, such demarcation seems a recent phenomenon because in pre-colonial times in both formal and informal traditional education, religion, moral and social education was intertwined (Matemba, 2011b). In other words, a holistic conception existed.

Another problem arising out of the inclusion of other religions is what Dube and Tsotetsi (2019), in the context of Zimbabwe term accommodation ‘resistance.’ Specifically, some Christians are not prepared to accommodate the right of other religions to be entitled to a curricular space. The issue of exclusion of others is linked to colonisation, where competition and tension with other religions became the norm. In short, it is asserted that the Christian religion wants to occupy the curriculum space undisturbed, despite the fact that some learners subscribe to other religions (Dube and Tsotetsi, 2019).

The contentious reforms and the historical periods within which they were carried out in Malawi have been studied, and clearly demonstrate religious tensions, ideological differences, and political wrangling of the various stakeholders involved. Over the years, the provision of RE has had some alternations as discussed below (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019). An article by Matemba found that since missionary times, a predominantly Bible-based curriculum has been offered in Malawi schools in RME. However, in 1991 reforms were initiated in the primary sector such that a multi-faith subject known as Religious and Moral Education (RME) supplanted Bible Knowledge (BK) (Matemba, 2013). Politically, the transition from a dictatorial regime to a multi-party democracy paved the way for the introduction of what came to be known as a multi-faith RE, modelled on Botswana’s 1996 RE curriculum, which in turn was inspired by British models of RE based on a multicultural and multi-faith society (Jarhall, 2001). The purpose of substituting the expressed confessional Christocentric RME was to assist students in appreciating the value and reality of living in a pluralist society, and to assist them in dealing with the challenges that political and religious pluralism might engender for society (Matemba, 2005).

The BK curriculum was revised again in 2006 for secondary schools. However, due to financial constraints, the Ministry of Education was unable to supply the revised programmes to schools (Matemba, 2013). As a result, in the secondary sector, the model of BK continues to be that which existed during missionary times. In junior secondary, it included stories, incidents, personalities and anecdotes from the Old and New Testaments. In the senior secondary, it is extensively based on the books of Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, and Isaiah (Matemba, 2013). The introduction of a multi-faith RME curriculum meant a direct challenge to the hitherto *status quo*. Thus there was resistance, mainly from the influential Christian community. Christian leaders resisted the inclusion of Islam as a religion of study in RME on the grounds of promoting Islam over Christianity (Matemba, 2009; Matemba, 2013). The situation was compounded by demands from other stakeholders, which resulted in the development of a unified curriculum becoming problematic. Moreover, affiliation with Christianity is so strong that people are averse to multi-faith RME. Matemba (2009) attributes this to a fear of Christian values being eroded and its heritage lost among the youth. Consequently, the government endorsed a dual curriculum arrangement. In reality, the popularity of BK vis-a-vis multi-faith RME continues unabated, mainly due to churches and parents preferring BK, as Malawi is seen to be a ‘Christian’ country, and also because of the leverage that Churches have over education (Matemba, 2009). This leverage manifested in terms of their influence on politics, educational policies, being proprietors

of most schools, curriculum and social affairs. At the same time, some missions promoted the spirit of egalitarianism and values of independence (Power, 2010).

As such, two curricula simultaneously operate for RME, with choice being given to individual schools regarding which programme to teach (Matemba, 2009). This only applies to junior secondary school. However in primary schools it is RME and in senior secondary school it continued to be BK. The multi-faith religious and moral education (RME) draws from Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Bahai faith and ATR. There is another distinction in the design and organisation of the curriculum. Here, the current approach differs from the earlier ones in that themes form the basis for teaching RE (Jarhall, 2001). Nevertheless, despite the dual syllabus arrangement, it is BK and not RME that prevails in most schools (Matemba, 2013). There are clear implications here to ensure that classrooms reinforce respect and tolerance. To this end, Matemba and Addai-Mununkum suggest that RME should reinforce inter-religious dialogue among students. The authors also highlight the need for specific funded in-service projects to provide teachers with new skills in dealing with multi-faith RME. Importantly, they suggest a need for a paradigm shift in the way the RE curriculum is designed and delivered in classrooms. However, bringing about changes to deep-rooted values and beliefs is problematic. This has the risk of protests from powerful Christian lobby groups, and also requires resources for upskilling teachers and teacher trainers (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019). It was also argued that multi faith RME would not easily be accepted in a homogeneous country like Malawi, where Christianity is the dominant religion. Moreover, the designers had been sensitive to the global developments but failed to appreciate the local contexts (Nkhoma, 2019).

Outline history of Religious Education in Malawi

Missionary schools were established sometime in 1873/1874 with Biblical literacy as the foundation of the school curriculum. In 1948, Malawi's first secondary school was established, and BK was made a compulsory subject. Schools continued to use the old syllabus of the 1920s when efforts by Churches to adopt the East African BK syllabus ('Developing in Christ') failed to win government support in 1974. However, the first revision of the BK after independence took place in 1982 when BK was made an elective for the first time in secondary schools. A significant step was taken in 1991 when RME replaced BK in primary schools. Importantly, no stakeholder contestation to these changes were reported. Politically, the first Muslim president was elected in 1994 after 30 years of dictatorship rule by a Christian. As this point multi-faith RME in all the school sectors gained momentum. In 2000, BK in secondary schools was replaced with RME. There was support for RME by Muslim leaders and parents, whereas Church leaders contested against RME. RME and national examination in RME in secondary schools were suspended. Consequently, a dual syllabus policy was introduced in 2001. In 2006, new BK programmes for secondary schools were developed, and a dual syllabus arrangement consisting of BK and RME came into existence in junior secondary (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019).

Based on the impasse, a new approach has been proposed, which may be referred to as the "neo-confessional approach" (Nkhoma, 2019: 348). In this approach, religions other than the central ones (Christianity and Islam) are recommended to be taught as tolerated extras. Briefly, the content and spirit of the curriculum would be based on a single faith tradition, in the Malawian case, Christianity and Islam, with references, examples and illustrations also drawn from aspects of other religions. Thus, based on the existing BK curriculum, a parallel Islamic RE (IRE) would need to be developed incorporating Christianity. Simultaneously, BK would need to be enriched by aspects of Islam, and, both BK and IRE, would draw materials from ATR. This would enable

the civic-orientated goals to be achieved and shape the moral character of pupils and develop them into responsible citizens (Nkhoma, 2019).

The law requires that local school management committees, elected at parent-teacher association meetings, decide the RME curriculum (United States Department of State, 2016). However, in addition to religious instructions which are faith based, there are hybrid “grant-aided” schools, which tend to be privately managed religious institutions, and whose teachers are salaried by the state. For this financial support, the government chooses a significant portion of the students who attend. In these junior secondary schools, a board is appointed by the school’s operators, who decide whether the BK or RME curriculum is to be offered (United States Department of State, 2016), whereas in primary schools RME is offered.

The single faith model is where the syllabus is informed by a single faith, like Christianity. The multi-faith model is informed by more than one religious tradition in equal measure. The dual model is constituted by administering both the single BK and the multi faith RME at the same institution (Nkhoma, 2019). In terms of provision, in primary schools it is RME, in junior secondary it is both BK and RME and senior secondary it is BK. As the focus of this chapter is on the primary RME, it is necessary to highlight the curriculum and content of the syllabus. The RME syllabus is developed in a thematic approach. Eight distinctive features of religions are broken down into themes, which are divided further into topics and units, and finally into lessons. The themes include ‘Ideas about God’, ‘Religious Founders/Leaders’, ‘Festivals and Celebrations’, ‘Moral Values’, ‘Worship’, ‘Holy Writings’, ‘Sin and Salvation’ and ‘Religious Symbols’ (Jarhall, 2001) and ethics, contemporary moral issues and gender equality among others (Nkhoma, 2019).

Pedagogically there are some challenges faced by teachers, which impacts the quality of provision and the dynamics of the classroom. Research has shown that in Malawi, among other factors, the quality of schooling, in some cases, is impounded by pedagogical methods that encourage rote learning and untrained teachers and their poor preparation, attitudes and motivation (Maluwa-Banda, 2003). In addition, Mtika and Gates (2010) reported several factors which impact secondary teachers’ adoption of learner-centred education. Moreover, some teachers were found to be off-task, spending time on passive learning, or copying information from the blackboard (Ravishankar, *et al.*, 2016). This study is relevant as it investigates the current teaching methods applied by these teachers.

Story telling: Theoretical framework

Stories in primary RME are indispensable for a variety of reasons, and can be described as the ‘manna’ for RME. Eade claims that they are the most powerful and underrated sources to assist pupils’ learning (Eade, 2011). However, the experience of most primary teachers of RME may not fully resonate with this assertion. Nevertheless, narratives provide coherence of meaning to otherwise incongruent events since narratives tend to be about people with desires, beliefs, knowledge, intentions and commitments (Bruner, 1996). Furthermore, Fowler (1976) asserted that younger pupils rely upon rich stories to provide images, symbols and examples for the vague but powerful impulses, feelings and aspirations forming within them. Thus, it could be said that stories have a transformative role in multiple ways, including psychological, emotional, religious and spiritual. It is no wonder then that globally across all communities’ folktales, riddles, proverbs, parables, dances, songs, and music characterised pre-modern society (Manda, 2015).

Stories also offer pupils symbols against which they can examine their own experiences. Ashton proposes that this is particularly significant for the growth and development of values, and also for children’s mental health in general (Ashton, 2000). Some stories are attractive as they

offer some pupils personal security and an escape from deep worries. In the context of religious education, Watson has argued that stories are the first step towards scriptural interpretation and theological meaning making (Watson, 2007).

Stories have the potency of providing each listener an opportunity to respond in their own way. This response can take many forms, and can be included as part of learning other subjects. Anning draws attention to a subtle idea, which is that the narrative form is a potent source to help children move into abstraction (Anning, 1997). In other words, pupils traverse from the here and now to the future and deep into their imaginations. Therefore, Ashton suggests that it is vital for pupils to be assisted in interpreting symbolic language, something very necessary for the communication of deep insights (Ashton, 2000).

It is through stories that communal and social values are produced, and stories help humans to explain and define themselves in relation to others, be it humans or the natural world. Stories further provide links to cultures, traditions and generations. Eade suggests that stories work in multiple, subtle, and often unconscious ways. They prompt reflection, and help to provide language through which to explore feelings, beliefs and questions to encourage inference and motivation (Eade, 2016).

In Malawi, as in other countries of the Global South, traditional storytelling is an essential strategy for transmitting common community values from one generation to another, values that may be distinctive to regions, villages, tribes or ethnic groups. Pedagogically, it is important to stress that the process is not totally passive as both adults and children learners interact with the storytellers in various formats. Stories are vehicles for the transmission and acquisition of knowledge, reinforcement of cultural identity, and transformation of characters. At times in the imaginary world the audience is taken beyond the realities of everyday life to a utopia, while at other times the audience is asked to accept life, and to act in the here and now. The advent of television and increased access to the internet has brought with it stories and programmes from outside Malawi, and the content and socio-cultural world life depicted in such programmes is starkly different in the vast majority of cases. The ancestral wisdom and knowledge about values, beliefs, culture, traditional norms and communal relations are now more than ever before in competition with those coming from outside the country through globalisation processes (REI, 2015).

It is important to recognise that stories are beyond entertainment, and are an African method of explaining the origins of some recurring events and evolution of the human race. They are used to educate and socialise children in communalism or *umunthu*, to entertain families in the evenings, and to pass on tribal history from one generation to the next (Manda, 2015). Interestingly, they are democratic, interactive and unrestrictive of copyrights, unlike the modern media, as mediums of communicating tribal or social reality and morality.

Methodology

This study is grounded in the qualitative paradigm of social research as it was conceptualised as a means to understand a phenomenon of RME taught in primary schools from the perspective of primary teachers, using interviews as well as questionnaires. The research was carried out in two primary schools in the Nkhotakota district, which is in the central region of Malawi.

Research design

In all, two interviews materialised, both of whom had also completed a questionnaire. Azibo, a Christian with more than 20 years of experience was employed in a government run Sangaleni

primary school, where there are only Muslim and Christian pupils. Gondwe was teaching in Magetsi school, which is run by Muslims, where there are pupils from Muslim, Christian and ATR backgrounds. Through the questionnaire, individuals were invited to opt-in for an interview, and although all but one opted out, when they were contacted for the interview only three were forthcoming. As such, this is a limitation of the study.

In terms of the data analysis procedures, to begin with, each participant was given an identification number. Thereafter, the responses to each question from all participants were grouped together. These were read more than once to search for relationships based on regularities, wherefrom repeating codes were identified. These codes were then examined in light of the rest of the codes to create emerging themes. These themes revealed the nature and frequency of their discourses, and their summaries were reported accordingly so as not to strip the data from their context (Punch and Oancea, 2014).

At the time of the research, there were nine teachers in Magetsi school; seven males and two females. In Sangalani school, there were sixteen teachers; ten males and six females. Therefore, twenty-five questionnaires were distributed in total. Nineteen had expressed interest. However, as delineated in Table 1 below, twelve questionnaires were returned through the head teacher who sent them as images using a phone. Eleven responses were from male teachers and one female, Khadijah [12], from Magetsi school. A female teacher from Sangalani school requested monetary allowance for completing the questionnaire. This was declined, in conformity with the ethical requirements of the study. Thus there is a clear gender imbalance in this study, in part resulting from a fewer female teachers in both schools. As of 2015, approximately 42 per cent of primary teachers in Malawi were female. Moreover, nationally there are also lower numbers of female teachers compared to male teachers at both primary and secondary levels (Robertson, Cassity and Kunkwenzu, 2017; Safford *et al.*, 2013).

Six responses were received from each school. This represented teachers teaching across the primary age phase, from Nursery to Standard 8 and that, most participants, at the time of the research, taught in the lower years. There is considerable difference in the length of their professional service; six teachers have been in teaching for at least five years, whereas five have taught for over 21 years. In terms of the duration of teaching, it is strange to note that two long serving teachers (respondents 4 and 9) have, apparently, taught RME for only 8 and 6 years respectively. In other words, for most of their career they taught BK. In contrast, at least four, who have recently joined the profession, have been teaching RME since they started their career. Interestingly, respondents 6 and 7 have been teaching RME for as long as they have been teaching, which is 24 and 21 years respectively. Most of the respondents (7) declared their faith background to be Christian whereas there were 5 Muslims. These self-descriptions were offered by the participants themselves, and have been recorded as such without delineating or probing further. Individuals can categorise their self-identities at various levels. These include individual, group, relational and social levels. Some people construct their religious identity broadly as a personal characteristic, whereas others construct it as a social belonging (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, *et al.*, 1987). Thus, homogeneity in their understandings and interpretations of stories, both religious and cultural, is not assumed. In Malawi, children enter primary school at age 6 where the first four years of teaching are in a local traditional language, mostly Chichewa. Thereafter, the medium of education shifts to English for the balance of the Malawi education program. Teachers are expected to use English in their professional work. Thus, they were invited to respond in English.

R		Faith	Std	Service	RME	Languages spoken			School
1	Limani	Christian	1	7	1	Chichewa	Lambya	Tumbuka	Magetsi

2	Mabvuto	Anglican, one God, Chewa	4	5	3	Chichewa			Magetsi
3	Gondwe	CCAP (Church of Central African Presbyterian)	8	5	5	Lambya			Magetsi
4	Chamangwana	Christian, one God, Chewa	7	26	8	Chichewa	Tonga	Tumbuka	Magetsi
5	Wahidi	Islam	3	2	2	Chichewa			Magetsi
6	Dziko	Christianity	3	24	24	Chichewa			Sangalani
7	Azibo	Christian, one God, Chewa	5	21	21	Chichewa			Sangalani
8	Samsoni	Christianity	2	2	2	Chichewa			Sangalani
9	Yasini	Islam	1	30	6	Chichewa			Sangalani
10	Yusufu	Islam	1	30	22	Chewa			Sangalani
11	Binali	Islamic	2	2	2	Chichewa			Sangalani
12	Khadijah	Islam (female)	N	7	3	Chichewa			Magetsi

Table 1: Standard taught, length of professional service, and experience of teaching RME

Interviews

This study employed two phone interviews, set at a mutually convenient time, and carried out in an ethical manner. Prior to the interview, participants were informed about their right to withdraw, informed consent, and anonymity. Initial questions focussed on basic background information as a way of warming up the participants and to build trust (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Participants were asked to confirm that they were happy with the place where they were in terms of privacy and noise. They were informed that the phone interview would be recorded to minimise distractions for both and to create a natural flow of the conversation. They were further informed to seek clarity in the case of any uncertainty on part of the researcher. For most of the time, open-ended questions were used to uncover as much about the participants and the topic as possible (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The researcher refrained from influencing the participants in any way, and maintained neutrality. At the end participants were thanked, and informed about what would happen to the data and the recording.

Since personal contact was not facilitated through the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were used to gain rich information in terms of their meanings and perceptions (Punch and Oancea, 2014). The interviews probed the participants further, with the aim of gaining personal insights. Importantly, the interviews offered an opportunity to obtain supplementary information, such as examples of stories based on participants' responses to the questionnaires. The use of Skype and WhatsApp had been planned. However, the former, due to technical challenges, did not materialise. Instead, two mobile phone interviews were conducted at a time and date most convenient to the teachers. This proved to be a very effective and economical way of collecting the data, particularly when they were geographically afar. The interviews were recorded, and then transcribed by the researcher.

There is no simple rule of thumb for the number of interviews to carry out in any particular study such as this (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The purpose of this study was not to generalise, and since a range of responses were obtained using questionnaires, three interviews were considered to be sufficient. Moreover, looking at the data in its entirety, it seems that the research questions have been answered to a degree of satisfaction, and have fulfilled the objectives. Nevertheless, to avoid the bias of a single interview, three interviews were planned, although two materialised from different schools. The interview data were complemented by the questionnaire data; making the total data set and size being examined larger than the data provided by the interviews only. The third interview, which was self-initiated by a head teacher of a different school, had been organised but it did not materialise, despite several efforts from both sides, as a

mutual time and date was not found. Interviews with other teachers were a challenge to organise. Initial contact by the researcher was made, but responses were not received, most likely due to limited internet access. The researcher did not invite these teachers to make contact lest they incurred a cost.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to yield some attitudinal responses and gather specific information about the teachers and their views about the significance of stories, their pedagogy, and other related matters. This combination allowed for an exploration of the relationships between concrete information and participants' personal views. The head teachers were used as gatekeepers through whom the questionnaires, participation information sheets, and consent forms were distributed and teachers recruited.

The utilisation of a self-completed questionnaire afforded the advantages of being economical, time efficient in gathering the data, and relatively straight-forward (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The global advancement in technology creates a challenge of remaining indifferent to the use of technology for research purposes, especially when participants live and work at a distance. Unsurprisingly, the use of social media applications such as WhatsApp are becoming more frequent (Willemse, 2015). However, two challenges were experienced. In this study, pictures of the completed questionnaires were sent via WhatsApp. Initially, some images were blurred, thus it became difficult to decipher the written text. At the second attempt, although the texts were legible, the issue of incomplete sentences became apparent. It was important to have these completed by the participants themselves due to the language diversity and nuances of local expressions. Nevertheless, the questionnaire was not onerous in the time required to complete it and it also allowed the researcher to target the questions. To address this shortcoming, specific questions and points of clarification were forwarded to them.

Malawi has three regions divided into 28 districts. Nkhosha is a multi-cultural and multi-faith area, with many Christians and others living in a majority Muslim enclave. This area has had a conflicted religious history in the past between Muslims and Christians, as well as between some Christians and traditionalists (Msiska, 1995). It was thus selected for its diversity. The question of bias is addressed by the inclusion of a Muslim and a government school and including all teachers within them regardless of their gender, experience, seniority and faith and belief affiliation.

Ethics

The research respected the privacy, autonomy and dignity of the study participants (BERA, 2018). To this end, participants signed a consent form declaring that they were voluntarily participating, and they had the right to withdraw at any point. In addition, they were fully informed about the aims of the research through a participation information sheet, which developed their confidence and transparency. Participants were informed not to provide their names so as to secure anonymity and confidentiality (Punch and Oancea, 2014), even then, all but one declared their names. Nevertheless, their identity has been anonymised through the use of pseudonyms, and confidentiality of data has been maintained by using numbers when analysing the data. Fictitious, yet culturally appropriate, pseudonyms have been applied for all the participants and both schools.

Findings and analysis

This section presents a critical exposition of matters related to the curriculum in the lived realities of these teachers as they encounter varied stories as part of their syllabus for religious education in their localised contexts. The analysis focuses on their use, conceptions, exemplification and

challenges. Significantly, the results reveal that the repertoire of their teaching strategies used with their pupils is wide. The chapter highlights the need to question, in the context of RE, an undifferentiated view of storytelling and its associated pedagogy within a particular national and geographic context in the Global South. It has shown that there is a complex phenomenon at play, albeit controversial in some respects.

Use of stories in RME

All twelve respondents indicated that they used stories for RME. This was expected, since storytelling is a popular tradition and means of teaching. In fact, Mphande (2014) observes that in Chewa, women are the best storytellers. The majority (9) use stories on a weekly basis, two daily and one did not declare. As the content of the folk narrative is affected by the occasion as well as the function of the particular performance (Mphande, 2014), Wahidi indicated that he used stories for RME in “almost all topics” [5]. Of the 12, four teachers used them in what could be termed as abstract topics. Encouragingly, eight respondents used them in topics specifically related to RE including praying, responding to God, messengers of God, festivals and celebrating. In addition, Yasini included the topic “Myself as a Creation of God” [9]. Samsoni, a recent entry into the profession, utilised stories to develop children’s responsibilities in the family.

Understanding traditional stories

Chimombo, Mvula and Macdonald have discussed the complexity of defining a traditional story (Mphande, 2014). These primary teachers expressed diverse understandings and exemplifications of a traditional story, which included aspects of geography, tradition, culture and religion. According to Wahidi, traditional stories explain the origin of all creatures, how God created the earth, and the origin of death. Similarly, Dziko thought that these were stories linking a traditional way of living to God’s powers to be saved. Furthermore, some believed that these were stories which gave a real image of people respecting God through their ancestors’ spirits and having trust in their true God.

Of these, four participants made no apparent reference to God, religions or Holy Scriptures. For instance, Yusufu, a Muslim, pointed to communal events, saying they narrate about events in the villages where people live. In the same vein, some took a locational perspective to opine that the stories depicted issues from local environments, whereas, Gondwe considered them to be stories associated with a specific culture, and were locally presented. However, Yasini stated they were “stories talking about traditional [knowing], [9]” and Samsoni felt these were legends explaining what people believe in a certain society. One of the purposes of telling these stories, according to Limani, is to change one’s behaviour. Perhaps it is a conception informed by sacred scriptures which aim to be didactic and morally instructive. It could be construed from these responses that some participants, regardless of their faith background, are equipping Malawian pupils to culturally, socially, and ideologically understand and appreciate their cultural values (Mphande, 2014).

Examples of traditional stories

These teachers took recourse to many traditional stories to support learning in RME. In exemplifying traditional stories, Azibo and Mabvuto mentioned the origins of ATR, whereas Wahidi included the *Kaphirintiwa* myth, which he uses to explain how God created the earth. For Limani, who is quadrilingual, the stories are also comprised of the hare and tortoise tale, and Samsoni identified the story of the Makewana of Maravi Kingdom of the Chewa tribe. According

to others, traditional stories encompass the *M'bona and his Kachiri* and “*A dog barks at a vehicle.*” In the interview, Gondwe claimed its origins were in ATR:

Animals were travelling in a vehicle who were supposed to pay the conductor. Having paid the fare, they were deprived of their change. Thus, whenever, a dog sees a vehicle, it chases it. In so doing, it reminds the conductor of the change owed to them, i.e. the sheep, dog, goat and cow [3].

Upon enquiry, in Standard 8, Gondwe uses it to teach about justice. Lickona (2004) observes that all religions and societies affirm virtues because they (religions and societies) are intrinsically good, and make a claim on human conscience. He maintains that virtues transcend time and culture, but their cultural expressions are diverse. He posits that justice and kindness in all places and time will be virtuous regardless of the number of people expressing the virtues. The story from Gondwe is a vehicle for transferring values from one generation to another.

Interestingly, Yusufu, a Muslim, responded by stating that a traditional story meant dancing using local songs. Another example embraced rituals. Chamangwana explained: it was “the birth of a child e.g. Jesus in a religion and other traditional cultural activities performed [4].” Since Yusufu was not interviewed, further insights could not be gained about dancing and the viewpoint on Islam on this. Perhaps it is an example of the accommodation of local customs by some Muslims (Mphande, 2014; Dicks, 2012). Nevertheless, dancing has the social function of bringing people together socially, and among the Tonga, there are at least nine types with various functions (Mphande, 2014).

Significance of traditional stories

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, all but two of these teachers selected 5 to indicate that traditional stories were significant for RME. One teacher chose 3 and another 4. This suggests that traditional stories are an integral medium for teaching RME for these participants. Unsurprisingly, when questioned about using traditional stories, all participants responded affirmatively. Nevertheless, caution needs to be exercised about the degree to which this can be generalized about RME in Malawi due to the small sample size and geographically confined study.

Mabvuto seems to be driven by the requirements of the subject, declaring that because ATR is in RME, he uses traditional stories. On the other hand, both Samsoni and Gondwe draw on the motivational potential of traditional stories to arouse learners’ interests in learning RME so that, according to Wahidi, who shares similar ideas, they understand the content easily. In contrast, Limani thinks that stories also contribute to changing behaviour in learners.

Stories are for meaning making. This is another key reason for the use of traditional stories in RME, expressed by at least three teachers. Yusufu felt that learners understand what they are learning and they enable clarification of a concept, which helps learners to catch up easily. In addition, Binali and Dziko used stories to support difficulties which learners may face. In the context of RME, in addition to comprehension, Yasini employs stories to relate the story with the topic being taught. Moreover, Azibo believes that stories encourage learners to link their visible activities at home with what is found in the syllabus to generate good experiences. Thus, stories create links with cultures and generations by offering examples of what to do or not (Eaude, 2016).

The expected outcomes of stories appear to focus on universal values. According to Yusufu, his learners follow good behaviour based on what stories tell them and, in turn, learners advise their friends to do the same. In the experience of Wahidi, traditional stories assisted children

in respecting elders, fearing sins, and respecting God. A teacher mentioned social development, stating that learners learn to be polite and soft hearted towards others. Another teacher expected students to learn to be hardworking, courageous when confronted with challenges, and open fisted when asked to give out something. In Standard 3, Dziko intends that students acquire knowledge of religion, develop the right skills for their growth, and trace the beginnings of stories.

Understanding religious stories

The teachers were asked about their conception of a religious story. Wahidi, a Muslim, and Dziko, a Christian, believed these to be stories related to belief in supernatural beings. Others positioned the identity of religious stories within a theological framework. For instance, Yasini and Yusufu concentrated on creation. To them, these are stories about God creating people, animals, and the universe.

Gondwe and Samsoni felt religious stories were written in the Bible, Qur'ān and in other religious scriptures and, according to Binali, the stories depict issues from Holy Books. Others maintained that these were stories containing different doctrines of different religions, religious teachings and artefacts to know God and the creation better, such as in Islam and Christianity. To this, only Limani specifically mentioned ATR.

Examples of religious stories

In citing examples of religious stories, based on the above conception, unsurprisingly the following examples were recorded from religious scriptures: the parable of the Good Samaritan, the creation of Adam and Hawwa (Eve), the story of Musa and Pharaoh, and the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan. Interestingly, Azibo and Chamangwana added a contemporary perspective saying religious stories were about how people communicated to God nowadays. In using scriptures, concern has been rightly expressed regarding the minimal references to the Bible and Qur'ān, whilst accentuating the similarities and differences in the value systems of the three religions (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019). However, these responses show the use of scriptures for multiple purposes. This includes conveying profound religious and cultural truths (Eaude, 2016).

Significance of religious stories

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, eight teachers selected 5 to indicate that religious stories were significant for RME. Two chose 4 and 3. There appears to be an overall reduction in significance when these results are compared with those about the significance of traditional stories for RME above. Only Wahidi and Chamangwana reduced the significance in using religious stories to 4 and 3 respectively.

All of these teachers declared that they use religious stories. According to the teachers, stories are indispensable for teaching RE (Jarhall, 2001; Conroy, *et al.* 2013; Mphande, 2014). Sacred texts contain stories, and religious founders and their pedagogies were based on storytelling, which suggests that the relationship between humans and stories is extrinsically linked. The utilitarian purpose was echoed by Binali, who reasoned that through religious stories learners learn moral behaviours and become good citizens. The educational dimension was reflected in the justifications given by Wahidi and Gondwe, who thought that religious stories, like traditional ones, arouse interest in learning. In the experience of Samsoni, religious stories open peoples' minds to know what people believe in.

In his response, Dziko seems to have alluded to one of the key aims of teaching about Holy Books in RME. He thought religious stories based on Holy Books enabled learners to know how God communicates with people, whereas Azibo and Chamangwana, both teaching for over 20 years, felt that the stories encourage learners to link visible activities at home and to understand Lord God in their beliefs. Similarly, Yasini thought that the stories enabled the learner to know how God created the creatures and the universe to develop strong beliefs in these. Interestingly, Limani maintained that religious stories “help to strengthen religious faith in learners, thereby changing their moral behaviours to virtue [1].” However, atypically, Yusufu, seems to lament the lack of religious stories, claiming that it was the only thing that they had for teaching. It is odd that Limani refers to strengthening religious faith in the context of RME; perhaps this indicates remnants of the confessional and proselytization model (Matemba, 2009). Nevertheless, the data indicate that, in addition to the significance that these teachers attach to religious and traditional stories in RME, they experience some challenges.

Challenges in using traditional stories

Participants were asked if they faced any challenges in using traditional stories, since Christians and Muslims, in particular, have expressed reservations regarding the inclusion of some content related to African Indigenous Religions (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019). Of all the participants, four declared that they did not face any difficulty in using traditional stories in RME. For Wahidi and Gondwe, the natural appeal of stories to children seems to be attractive. They uphold the view that learners are more interested in these stories, learners are engaged, and they (stories) provide novelty, otherwise Gondwe noted that “some learners feel boring [sic] because some stories are not new to them [3].”

Of the six who admitted to experiencing difficulties, two did not specify the challenge, reporting that due to the presence of different religions they experience “a lot of difficulty [10].” However, four teachers highlighted important elements related to the role of stories in RME. Binali, a Muslim with two years’ experience, seemed concerned about ensuring that stories were meaningful, stating “some traditional stories go against other religious stories therefore learners get confused [11].” Similarly, others were concerned about making stories relevant, maintaining that ‘old’ stories do not relate to their daily life, and that altering of names confuses the learners. Moreover, Khadijah noted that some of her learners do not relate the stories to the present times, like Moses (Musa).

However, only two participants expressed theological challenges. Samsoni, having taught for two years, declared that some stories are exaggerated and difficult to believe. In addition, Limani commented that since stories were kept in memories and not in records, they are easily forgotten and vary from generation to generation.

Challenges in using religious stories

It was encouraging to discover that some teachers, rather than being concerned about the nature of the stories being used, focussed on pupil learning. For instance, Yusufu in Standard 1, faced challenges in ensuring that all of his learners understood the stories. Similarly, although Mabvuto declared that he faced difficulties particularly when teaching the senior section, he did not reveal his problems. However, two teachers declared that they did not experience any difficulty, one of whom stated that there were no difficulties as learners understand concepts easily.

On the other hand, at least eight responses exposed difficulties related to the nature of the content of religious stories, comprehension, the use of supporting resources; presumably to avoid

offence. Gondwe's comment captured these tensions suitably: "The problem is difference in religion by learners therefore the stories seem to be contradicting due to the information from different religions [3]." Similarly, Yasini explained that some stories are religiously based, so it is hard for other religious learners to understand the point. Such sentiments were also echoed by two others who felt that most learners already had their own beliefs; thus giving stories with new beliefs might contribute to missing the target of understanding. Dziko, a Christian, experienced difficulties in using pictures of God, prophets and messengers of God. For Samsoni, it was the conflicts in doctrinal difference between religions. The reality of contemporary RE was highlighted by Limani. He claimed that because learning was inclusive, for him, it was difficult to make all learners with different religions get interested at the same time when telling a story of a particular religion. Khadijah, with seven years of experience, drew attention to an important aim of RME, which is the development of a positive attitude. She noted that some learners of different religious beliefs may have negative attitudes toward the stories.

Classroom and pedagogical matters

This section critically discusses matters related to the classroom, pedagogy and everyday experiences of these teachers as they grapple with the complexities of stories with their pupils.

Resources to support storytelling

Respondents were asked about the resources, if any, they used to support their stories in RME lessons and the benefits that these afforded, since the lack of resources impede the quality of teaching (Ravishankar, *et al.*, 2016). These teachers had access to and utilised a range of resources, including religious books such as the Bible, Qur'an, as well as syllabus textbooks and other reference material. According to Azibo, these types of materials assist learners in visualising things as they happen even though they happened years ago. Importantly, for Samsoni they simplified complex religious ideas. In addition, books, pictures, illustrations, charts, drawings, flip charts and the *M'bona* were declared beneficial for bringing the lesson of stories to reality. In Gondwe's experience, the materials also assist learners to imagine what they are learning. In using flipcharts, Yusufu and Chamangwana, with 30 and 26 years' experience respectively, found that the materials let learners understand what they are learning.

Furthermore, audio players and video clips enhance the detail of stories, compared with oral narrations. Importantly, Mabvuto, who teaches Standard 4, makes use of the local environment as it supports learners in understanding the concept being taught at a particular time. The use of the local environment, mentioned by Khadijah, seems to resonate with the African indigenous education principle of holism (multiple learning), whereby learning is not confined to the classroom (Banda and Morgan, 2013). Crucially, Limani uses the "resource person" [1], which Gondwe explained in the interview as follows: "These were people in the village who know stories better. Once the story is planned by a teacher, they invite the special person who contributes to their lessons at the development stage, to explain it to the learners [3]." Perhaps this is an example of the principle of perennialism, a philosophical foundation of African indigenous education, which is a vehicle for maintaining cultural heritage (Banda and Morgan, 2013: 202).

The Chewa non-professional story-tellers are good narrators, and respected for their imagination. Some of them inherit their talents through their father's or mother's line (Mphande, 2014). Their style is influenced by events, places, time and functions. During the performance, the stylistic devices among Chewa story-tellers include audience participation, "the opening formula, characterization, idiophones, repetition, suspense, stringing folk narrative together and the closing

formula.” The audience and the narrator see story telling as a joint activity, where the storyteller leads as the audience receives the message and supports by giving immediate feedback. The audience joyfully and openly react to “some funny words, exaggerations, mimicry or gestures, which have dramatic effects” (Mphande, 2014: 20).

Storytelling, group work, and explanation

Study participants recorded and rationalised all the methods they applied to teach stories in RME. At least seven teachers offered encouraging and detailed descriptions of their methods and their justifications. Overall, these appear to be in sync with constructivist theories of learning, where learners, rather than being passive, have a role in their learning (Mtika and Gates, 2010). In total, at least eleven different methods became evident. Interestingly and, as expected, in most cases their reasoning varied, suggesting teacher autonomy through drawing on their own pedagogical philosophy to inform their practices. Such autonomy is indicative of the opportunities available to the teachers to use diverse methods of delivering their stories in educational settings where the ethos seems to welcome individuality and creativity.

The most common methods used during storytelling, both with at least five occurrences from seven teachers, were group work and explanation. Both were used for a variety of purposes. Gondwe gathered his learners into groups to analyse and describe characters. Similarly, Yasini, who teaches Standard 1, thought that group work assists learners in sharing knowledge on parts of the story. In the experience of Chamangwana and Azibo, group work “gives learners ample time to go deeper in lessons by assisting each other [4; 7].” Interestingly, Mabvuto appears to have gone beyond the content of the stories and reasoned that, for him, group work provided learners with an opportunity to share their experiences in the concept they learn. These methods continue to feature in Standard 8, where Gondwe found that explanations were useful for learners to acquire the skills of listening. In the experience of Azibo and Chamangwana, through explanations, learners receive new concepts and understand the content. Moreover, Mabvuto appears to utilise explanation for extending learning following discussions. In her nursery, Kadajah finds that group work assists pupils in working as a team and that “a group leader is able to help slow learners get advantages from others [12].”

Storytelling: questions and answers

Literature shows that learner-centred education promotes creative intelligence, critical thinking, and problem solving skills (Mtika and Gates, 2010). The use of questions and answers is a popular and old-age method for teachers the world over, and aids learner-centred education. Five teachers recorded the use of questions and answers during their story telling in RME, for a range of benefits. According to Yasini, the use of questions and answers enables teachers to know if learners have engaged with the concepts. As part of assessment, Dziko, who has been teaching for 24 years, uses questions and answers to provide opportunities to learners to give feedback, whereas Khadijah uses the process to receive feedback from her pupils, and to monitor their attentiveness to the lesson or story. Fascinatingly, Samsoni finds room for peer teaching through questions and answers. He uses the process “to find out whether learners are following [the] work, so that fast learners can assist slow learners [8]”. Importantly, Azibo and Chamangwana assert that questions and answers enable learners to understand their lessons.

Storytelling and active learning

Several teachers, with experiences ranging from seven to thirty years and teaching across the different age groups, referred to teaching methods which could be classified as active learning. Ravishankar, *et al.*, (2016: xviii) reported that only 25 percent of their observed teaching periods were occupied with active teaching and learning activities, in the form of discussions, group work, activities, and answering questions. Gondwe and Yasini believe that role play in RME lessons supports learners in their achievement of the best morals acted in the story, and also enables learners to act out the roles of characters in the story for better understanding. In addition, Yasini recorded that demonstrations aid learners in visualising what the stories convey and how they can implement the morals. For Azibo and Chamangwana, the use of the dramatisation technique allows learners to develop new skills and to further understand the story. These teachers maintained that story telling attracts learners' attention, and assists them in relating and connecting to the stories. Importantly, Chamangwana, a quadrilingual, felt that "storytelling helps learners to be resourceful [4]." Mabvuto included the use of excursions, since according to him, it gives learners the opportunity to observe the environment supporting them.

Storytelling: talk and dialogue

A critical and collective reading of participants' responses to the question of talk and dialogue reveals that these teachers attached some significance to promoting talk and dialogue as it promotes comprehension. Dialogue develops the skill to have conversations, which in turn promote tolerance and an exchange of similarities and differences and complements in ways which are sensitive to each other's feelings (Castelli, 2018). Discussions were also used so that learners show deeper understanding during the debates and group discussions. According to Yasini, discussions facilitate in making learners participate fully in their lessons. Gondwe found space for developing empathy as his learners discuss the story and identify the characters in the stories. At least two teachers observed that working in pairs reduces shyness amongst their learners, and for Samsoni, not only does it arouse learners' interest, it also ensures that "every learner participates [8]."

Teachers' conceptualisation of RME

As discussed earlier, there exists a varied understanding of RME. This diversity is also reflected among these Malawian teachers. Their responses appear to fall into two main perspectives; those who see RME as being educational, and others who conceive it as means of what could be termed 'faith transmission'. Wahidi and Khadijah, both Muslims, understood RME in terms of an educational endeavour, saying, it is "the study of different religions [5; 12]". To this, Samsoni, a Christian, added, "to learn their values and beliefs [8]". However, Yasini felt RME was the study of God's creation.

In response to this question, at least four teachers focussed on the process involved in RME. Limani, who has been teaching for seven years, thought that RME was "the process of teaching moral values, doctrine, beliefs and virtues of different religions [1]." Azibo, Chamangwana and Dziko, shared some detail about what this might entail. For them, it was the "teaching of peoples' beliefs toward God and His creation and how God is being obeyed in every religion and the moral beliefs in God [7; 4; 6]." In addition to the inclusion of beliefs about God, four other teachers drew attention to communal and environmental matters, recording that it is that which focusses on aspects such as moral values and beliefs, social development. Mabvuto incorporated environment protection as well. On the other hand, Gondwe submitted that RME was "a system of imparting

spiritual life of God in learners, students and all people [3]” and, according to Yusufu, a Muslim, it was “praying to God in recommended ways of praying [10].”

In most responses, even though the question specifically asked about their understanding of RME, the interconnectedness of moral and values education with RME is noticeable. It is plausible to suggest that they have their learners’ moral interest in mind, and perhaps this is a way of getting to the core of religious life (Felderholf and Thompson, 2014). Equally, the absence of mentioning a particular religious tradition is evident.

Nevertheless, in exploring the philosophical nature of their RME, participants’ responses also illustrate a multi-faith model. The RME taught by Gondwe and Limani, both Christians, accommodates all religions, i.e., Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. Unlike the findings from Matemba and Addai-Mununkum (2019), where some self-confessed Christian teachers did not consider *non-normative* religions worth studying, Dziko justified this approach on the basis that “people do not belong to one religion [6].” Interestingly, Azibo and Chamangwana, both Christians, stated that the multi-faith model’s purpose was to enlighten learners to understand the true God. Samsoni used the term “inter-religious education [8]” for his RME because, he claimed, there was cooperation between these three main religions in the country.

In the interview, Azibo explained that ATR was taught in Malawi and is practiced in different ways, including Gule Wamkulu (‘The Great Dance’). This is an oral drama and is an important tradition of the Chewa people. The different Gule Wamkulu characters are represented by their unique masks and their own moral or cultural messages that benefit the community as a whole (Jarhall 2001; Mphande, 2014).

To Samsoni and Limani, moral education in RME entails teaching the principle of right and wrong, or conforming to standards of behaviour and character based on these principles. In other words, for them, it is about teaching pupils to discern behaviour, both theirs and that of others. However, at least four respondents understood it to be about good manners and recommended behaviours in the general sense so that, according to Dziko, learners are helped to live positively in their society. Khadijah also appeared to adopt a sociological viewpoint as she thought it was the study of good and bad behaviour accepted by society. However, Binali, Azibo, Chamangwana and Mabvuto seem to have a broader conception of moral education as their understandings embrace ancestral customs. To them, moral education “refers to ancestral teaching through tribal and cultural aspects like eating habits, praying styles, seating arrangements and ways of dressing [11; 7; 4].” This seems to echo with the idea that “indigenous ways of knowing are based upon customs, beliefs, behaviours and world views that are different from learning systems established by Western educational institutions” (Banda and Morgan, 2013: 202). Yusufu and Yasini appear to have situated moral education within RME, saying it was the teaching of good things in religious studies.

Discussion

To most Malawians, religion is important in their lives, and this includes students for whom it is very important (Mtumbuka, 2007). It seems appropriate for the government to recognise this by ensuring that RME is part of the school curriculum. The move towards a multi-faith RME demonstrates the reality of a post-confessional and pluralistic society that the country is and had always been prior to the arrival of Christianity and Islam. Nevertheless, in the Malawi context, RME continues to be seen in Christian confessional terms. Even in RME, teachers adopt neo-confessional approaches in classroom discourse. Within their conception RME, there are

implications for teachers to continue placing greater emphasis on the need to account for this diversity and to assist learners to recognise this diversity (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019; Everington, 2018).

The study's data, though limited, have suggested that these teachers consider their learners to have an active role in their learning. The primary teachers use a wide range of teaching methods, which can be deemed to fall under the child-centred pedagogy. In fact, they provide opportunities to question. However, there was insufficient evidence to suggest that the teachers offered opportunities to their learners to critically evaluate the knowledge passed down to them. This is important for both retaining and transforming some of the customs in light of current inclusive thinking. These teachers experience a paucity of resources, which seems to be impeding the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning. There is a problem of reading culture in Malawi, and textbooks are poorly distributed and are not utilised effectively in class (Ravishankar, *et al.*, 2016). These teachers did not explicitly mention the use of reading stories as part of RME. Further research would be needed to determine the extent to which reading activities are used in RME to enhance students' overall competency in literacy. This study has pointed towards further research among pupils and stories.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the need to question, in the context of religious education, an undifferentiated view of storytelling and its associated pedagogy within a particular national and geographic context in the Global South. It has shown that there is a complex phenomenon at play, albeit controversial in some respects.

There are clear limitations in this study in terms of the number of interviews and questionnaire responses, among which there was only one female participant. The study intended to conduct three interviews, ultimately only two were secured. Despite this, the data as a whole were sufficient to address the study's questions. Geographically, this research focussed on a single district. Therefore, these findings cannot be generalised. Nevertheless, based on data gathered, these teachers use stories, both traditional and religious, for a variety of purposes. Overall, the stories are used for promoting pro-social values and universal virtues and their unique indigenous customs. In other words, dances, religious sacred literature, oral and literary traditions continue to be spiritually, morally and intellectually important as teachers face challenges to retain their cultural identity and indigenous customs. Granted that these teachers face personal challenges, their professionalism seems to afford them the opportunity to see the need for their RME to be pluralistic. Based on these expressed difficulties, it is crucial for educational leaders to understand the importance of offering continued professional development.

The attitude of Malawian primary teachers towards RME is crucial in ensuring that religions are appropriately represented in classroom discourses, otherwise RME may continue to present a distorted picture of religion, and therefore fail in its civic responsibility as a curriculum area (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019). This is all the more important in a country where the majority of its inhabitants appear to think about themselves as belonging and believing in a religion or traditions. The implication for the curriculum is being aware of the potential that it may sow seeds of 'othering', which in turn may lead to deepening suspicion of each other in a country which is linguistically, ethnically, culturally, spiritually and religiously varied.

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