

## A phenomenological approach to teaching moral topics in the Christian Religious Education (CRE) syllabus in public secondary schools in Kakamega Central, Kenya

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### ABSTRACT

Teaching children morals is beneficial in helping them to become responsible and act ethically. In Kenya, Christian Religious Education (CRE) has traditionally been the primary subject for imparting moral values in secondary schools. However, there is increasing questioning about the effectiveness of CRE in addressing ethical issues among youth, such as school unrest, substance abuse, and corruption. This current article examines the methods employed to teach morals in CRE, with a focus on a phenomenological approach and Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. The study targeted public secondary schools in Kakamega Central, Kenya, with a sample of five teachers with over five years of experience in teaching CRE. Data were collected through unstructured interviews, which were then transcribed and analyzed using the thematic analysis approach. Key outcomes indicated that the predominant teaching methods are teacher-centered, heavily reliant on thinking skills, and focused on testing, leaving little room for students to engage, reflect, or internalize moral values. The study recommended combining dialogical, experiential, and culturally responsive teaching techniques, which can be supported by changes in policy and targeted professional development for teachers.

**Key words:** Christian Religious Education, Critical Pedagogy, Moral Pedagogy, Phenomenology, Values Education

### I. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, Kenya has considered moral education an essential component of its formal school system. African Indigenous Education, which was closely tied to the community's culture, focused on developing a person's character in all areas of life. Social participation, rites of passage, storytelling, mentorship from elders, and community responsibilities all contributed to shaping ethical behavior within this system. Community members were expected to live by values such as honesty, respect, commitment to others, and discipline. Children learned moral behavior by observing others, participating in group activities, and through stories and proverbs that emphasized justice, humility, and integrity (Ocitti, 1973). Moral education was experiential, rooted in the realities of daily life and closely linked to real-world consequences.

In modern Kenyan schools, Christian Religious Education (CRE) has become the primary vehicle for transmitting moral values to students. From primary school through to secondary education, the subject is embedded in the curriculum to help students internalize Christian values (Othoo & Aseu, 2022). While CRE aims to connect with traditional methods of moral instruction, it often falls short in achieving the level of participation and engagement seen in those indigenous approaches. The classroom environment typically separates values from real-life experiences, reducing CRE to a subject to be studied rather than a practical ethical guide. As a result, a gap exists between knowing what is right and acting on those beliefs, leading to students who can discuss ethics but struggle to apply them in their daily lives (Gogo, 2020).

Exploring the issue of moral education at the global level, it becomes evident that the education system in every country is concerned about the problem of inculcating moral behaviors in students, particularly in the context of rising societal complexities. Teaching techniques, the teaching material in the curriculum, and educational policy can be regarded as independent variables in these studies. In contrast, students' moral actions, ethical judgment, and moral action potential are well described as dependent variables. As an illustration, Freire's critical pedagogy, which promotes dialogue, participation, and critical thinking, has been shown to enhance moral reasoning in students from diverse parts of the world (Freire, 1970). On the same note, the combination of culturally responsive pedagogies and hands-on learning experiences has been shown to create a stronger connection between theoretical knowledge and practical application in real-world contexts.

At the local level (Kenya), the independent variables are the teaching methods used in CRE, the emphasis on memorizing the scripture compared with a practical approach to Bible knowledge, institutional limitations in terms of the time available (possibly time-limited teaching), and exam-focused teaching. Dependent variables involve the ethical development of students about this undertaking, where the ethical development of students, as well as their application and integration in the outside world, comes into play. In the study area of Kakamega Central, schools are facing problems such as school disturbances, drug reliance, and fraud in school examinations, which highlight the gaps in moral teaching (Kakamega Central District, 2020). There is a considerable demand for pedagogical reforms in the region to incorporate a higher degree of student-centered and experiential approaches to CRE, in order to address concerns related to ethics (Nyangaresi et al., 2024).

Interaction between independent and dependent variables is also crucial in determining the effectiveness of moral education. The relationship between a teaching approach (independent variable) and the ethical behavior of students (dependent variable) has remained a key interest in the global context. The deployment of pedagogies that emphasize dialogue, participation, and reflective practice has been shown to produce more favorable results in moral engagement as well as ethical practice in the real world. Reportedly, there has been a lack of connection between the CRE syllabus (independent variable) and the moral behavior of students (dependent variable) in the local context. The emphasis on recitation and memorization of scripture might offer insights into educational theory (Gogo, 2020). However, it is not practical for encouraging children to think critically about moral issues and engage in critical thinking. The disconnection of theory and practice in moral education restricts the success of moral education in correcting some vices that exist in society, like violence, substance abuse, and exam malpractice (Lacey, 2017).

The debate over teacher-centered and student-centered pedagogies is a major discourse in global research on moral education. A teacher-centered system, which prevails in most educational systems, including Kenyan CRE classrooms, has been more inclined towards knowledge acquisition as opposed to moral growth. Contrastingly, student-centered models, as exemplified by Freire and other critical pedagogues, focus on discussion, critical thinking, and the critical elaboration of real-life ethics. Such a discussion is important in the Kenyan context, as the lecture-based approach to moral teaching has been criticized for being unhelpful in actively engaging people in the moral process (Freire, 1970).

The second important discourse is the conflict between secular ethics and religious education. CRE is meant to instill both religious know-how and moral growth in Kenya. Nevertheless, critics argue that this religious emphasis can hinder students from considering ethical issues in a broader context, especially in a diverse society. The question, therefore, is what can be done to teach Christianity in CRE in a manner that will go beyond conveying Christian values to encouraging critical moral thinking that is not confined by religious lines.

Although the policies in this regard in education are strong, we cannot help but mark the insufficiencies when it comes to introducing effective moral education strategies. Narrowing the gap between curriculum intentions and classroom realities is one such gap. Although the CRE syllabus aims to teach moral values, teaching practices do not always help students think critically about ethical matters. Additionally, modern moral issues (problems linked to technology, sexuality, and social justice) are not adequately covered in the curriculum (Lacey, 2017).

The other gap is the minimal application of the student-centered, experiential teaching technique. Despite research findings in other parts of the world indicating that these methods are more successful in building moral reasoning and ethical behavior, large class sizes, excessive focus on examinations, and a lack of training in moral pedagogy limit their use in Kenya (Parkes et al., 2020).

Such gaps are mostly evident in Kakamega Central, the study area. Teachers are overwhelmed by the demands of curriculum coverage and examination success, which do not allow them time for in-depth discussions on ethics. The alternative teaching methods, which might attract more students towards the moral education, are also not supported by the institution itself. This suggests the need for a more comprehensive approach to moral education, encompassing dialogical, experiential, and culturally relevant forms of education.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

In Kenya, it is argued that moral education cannot be sidelined in character education in schools, and Christian Religious Education (CRE) has been the greatest means of instilling moral education in secondary schools. Nevertheless, the curriculum, although aimed at inculcating ethics in students, has not resolved the moral problems that still affect learners: unrest in schools, substance abuse, dishonesty, and violence (Nyangaresi et al., 2024). The fact that there is a continuous disconnect between the aims of CRE and students' behavior indicates the inefficiency of the teaching approach currently applied. CRE is essentially teacher-centred and operates on the familiarisation of script and the teaching of doctrine, thus making no room for thinking, pondering, or transferring learning into practice in the real world (Osabwa, 2016; Munene, 2016). Moreover, the curriculum fails to address most students' concerns about cisgender-based violence, social justice, and environmental responsibility, which are contemporary issues facing students that are gaining relevance (Nyangaresi et al., 2024; Lacey, 2017). The paradigmatic approach to pedagogy, as described by CRE, also fails to accommodate any form of experiential learning or student-focused learning, thereby reducing the chances

of students connecting with moral matters (Munene, 2016). The study will also explore the teaching of moral principles in the CRE syllabus within the Kakamega Central region in Kenya and identify the existing pedagogical gaps that hinder students from acquiring the reasoning and application of morals in their daily lives.

## 1.2 Research Objective

To explore how moral topics are taught in the CRE syllabus in public secondary schools in Kakamega Central, Kenya.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework of effects is derived from Deontological Ethics by Immanuel Kant and Critical Pedagogy by Paulo Freire. These theories offer diverse perspectives on moral education, emphasizing rational autonomy, universal moral laws, dialogue, and student involvement. They also have special applicability to Christian religious education (CRE) being taught in Kenyan secondary schools.

#### 2.1.1 Deontological Ethics (Immanuel Kant)

In Deontological Ethics, Kant focuses on the fact that morality as a concept is based on rational autonomy and deference to universal moral laws. Kant believed that moral actions are those that can be applied universally and without contradiction, and moral duties need to be executed simply because they are right, regardless of whether the outcomes are positive or not, or whether a person desires them or not (Gregor & Wood, 1998). In such a framework as CRE, Kantian ethics questions the more familiar models of teacher-centered learning that rely on memorization and scripture. Rather, it promotes a pedagogy that utilizes critical thinking to enable students to carefully consider moral issues and apply ethical principles to analyze practical experiences. The approach will guide students to embrace the moral values and make sound moral decisions, utilizing the agency of reason rather than unthinkingly following the established guidelines.

#### 2.1.2 Critical Pedagogy (Paulo Freire)

Critical Pedagogy, as presented by Freire, is concerned with the transformative power of education as a dialogic process that involves critical thinking and student engagement (Freire, 2020). Freire criticizes traditional types of education characterized as the system of the impersonal (namely banks) introduction of the knowledge into the mindlessness of the students, instead supports the idea of educating as providing the students with the role of a power in the critical reflection of the social reality, and subsequent action against injustices. When applied in CRE, the Freire approach promotes a more participatory and dialogical model of teaching, enabling students to critically engage with morally laden material and apply their values to real-life situations. This approach aligns with promoting ethical behavior, as students engage in conversations about real-world ethical questions, which enables them to formulate their rational moral judgments (Freire, 1970).

### 2.2 Empirical Review

Moral education enables teachers to discuss how learners perceive, internalize, and apply moral values beyond the formal educational setting. In religious education, particularly Christian Religious Education (CRE), phenomenological approaches have been employed to facilitate students' understanding of how they can interpret moral teachings through reflection, discussion, and contextual experiences. Waweru (2015) points out that learners will be more interested in moral lessons when their life experiences and cultural stories are taken into account during the instructional process.

The CRE syllabus in Kenyan public secondary schools aims to inculcate moral values through biblical stories and their application in practical life. It contains topics as integrity, justice, respect for human life, and compassion (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development [KICD], 2013). In practice, however, delivery can be heavily dependent on rote learning and teacher-centered approaches, which can hinder more in-depth moral reflection. Barasa (2016) reported that in *Trans-Nzoia County*, the moral content is covered sufficiently by teachers, but there is little reflection on the part of learners. The inability of curriculum intentions to translate into classroom practice raises questions about the effectiveness of moral education in promoting behavioral change (Leach et al., 2014).

In a phenomenological study, Nyangaresi et al. (2024) investigated the interaction of students with moral themes in CRE in Kakamega, using personal accounts, reflective interviews, and participatory learning. The results indicated that students who participated in these learner-centered and reflective tasks possessed better moral reasoning and were able to apply the classroom teachings to real-life situations. Conversely, individuals in more traditional lecture-style environments had little moral application and tended to view CRE as an academic exercise rather than a transformative

one. This confirms the argument that the phenomenological approach enhances moral knowledge because it connects the knowledge to the realities of the students.

Despite this encouraging evidence, several gaps remain in the literature. First, the current research tends to focus on a limited scope of moral subjects, which can easily overlook modern ethical issues such as sexuality, environmental responsibility, and civic responsibility. Secondly, there is a lack of studies on the readiness of teachers to employ phenomenological approaches in teaching morals, especially in low-resource areas such as rural Kakamega. Mutai et al. (2024) noted that large classes, exam-oriented instructional methods, and the absence of in-service training cause the inability to use reflective and student-centered strategies.

Moreover, little is given to the role of cultural and social factors, including respect for authority and the value of the community, in the readiness of students and teachers to engage in open moral discourse. Lastly, the majority of the studies are short-term and fail to measure the long-term moral growth due to the phenomenological approaches. The absence of longitudinal studies prevents answering the question of how such approaches affect the behavior and decision-making of learners in the long term (Bernard, 2024).

### III. METHODOLOGY

In this study, a descriptive phenomenology design was used to understand the situation in which the Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers choose to apply moral instruction techniques. The phenomenological design enabled the researcher to gain precise, firsthand insight into the lived experiences of the teachers without making any prior assumptions or prejudgments (Groenewald, 2004).

#### 3.1 Targeted Population

The population targeted according to this study was the teachers teaching CRE in public secondary schools located in Kakamega Central Sub-County, Kenya. The teachers were chosen because they specifically deal with moral teaching by teaching CRE and have experience in character education.

#### 3.2 Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

The study participants were selected through purposive sampling, as the primary goal of the study was to gather information from experienced and engaged teachers in moral education. Five secondary schools in the local area were identified to participate in the study, and one CRE teacher was interviewed at each of them. These selected teachers had not been teaching CRE for less than five years with a deep experience in character education in schools.

#### 3.3 Data Collection

The unstructured interviews were used to collect data, allowing participants to express their opinions freely and in detail. The interviews took 45-60 minutes each. The interviews aimed to discuss the teaching methods used by the teachers and how they perceive the effectiveness of moral education, as well as the issues they face during the process of offering CRE.

#### 3.4 Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded on tape and transcribed, with analysis conducted using the six-step process of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method enabled the identification of the most important themes and patterns in the experiences of teachers, providing a detailed, qualitative insight into the moral teaching method employed by the CRE teachers.

### IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 The Most Common Teaching Strategies in CRE

According to the study, the majority of classes in CRE subjects in secondary schools fell short of expectations, with most classes dominated by lectures and examinations. Instead of moral promotion, an emphasis was put on how the curriculum should be covered and how good their results on national exams should be. One of the participants said, "Our primary objective is to assist students in passing exams." This indicates a broader view in which the moral features of CRE were treated as secondary, with morality teachings either taken to be obvious or covered informally. It is an unusual way to deliver CRE, as it is intended to instill an ethical character; however, in this manner, the process has become more mechanical due to the push to achieve academic goals. The teachers often stated that deadlines and academic success were more stressful than the mission of transforming their students into ethical individuals.

This finding resonates with the arguments of Osabwa (2016) and Munene (2016), who contend that CRE pedagogy often treats moral issues as theoretical concepts rather than real-life experiences. When students are taught to

memorize answers, they might view morality as simply getting the correct answer, rather than engaging with it as a guide for ethical action. According to Kantian ethics, this approach is problematic because it does not promote the development of self-governing moral agents. If students are not encouraged to reflect on the values they are learning critically, they may follow rules without developing the internal strength needed to act ethically (Brinkmann & Friesen, 2018).

#### 4.2 Guidance and Counseling in CRE

All participants in the study acknowledged that guidance and counseling were key elements in teaching moral education. However, they noted that counseling is often reactive, primarily used when misconduct occurs, rather than being integrated into the regular moral teaching process. One teacher observed, *"We help when students make mistakes, but there is no specific way to teach values."* This statement suggests that while counseling plays a role in addressing behavioral issues, it is not systematically linked to moral education in a proactive and structured manner.

The study revealed that teachers felt a lack of support in providing moral education, particularly in discussions of ethics. Dunne et al. (2006) similarly found that in many sub-Saharan African schools, counseling services suffer from insufficient resources and poorly trained staff, leading to inconsistent approaches to handling student behavior. Teachers without formal training in psychology were expected to deal with challenging student behavior using unstructured and inconsistent methods, which hindered the effectiveness of moral education.

From a Kantian perspective, moral education should be proactive, teaching students right from wrong because it is inherently the right thing to do, not merely as a response to their mistakes. Munene (2016) emphasizes that moral development requires opportunities for reflection on ethical issues, not just the correction of wrong behaviors. When moral education is perceived as a form of punishment, rather than a reflective process, it undermines the character development CRE aims to foster.

#### 4.3 Student Involvement and Role Models

The study found that student engagement in moral education was low, particularly in schools where traditional teaching methods were prevalent. Although some schools offered leadership positions, peer mentoring, or moral clubs, these initiatives were rarely structured or tied directly to CRE. One participant explained, *"Leadership roles teach students responsibility, but we do not relate them to character development."* In schools where such engagement structures were in place, they were often viewed as secondary activities, rather than integral parts of the learning process.

However, several participants shared inspiring examples of student-led initiatives, such as discussions on honesty and respect that encouraged students to support one another in being accountable. As one teacher stated, *"If students lead talks about honesty or respect, they start to support each other in being accountable."* This finding aligns with the argument by Gladstone and Cimpian, (2021), who assert that the most effective way to instill moral values in students is to help them discover and apply these values in their lives, rather than simply transmitting knowledge.

A significant concern raised by participants was the disconnect between the moral values taught in CRE and the behavior modeled by some educators. One teacher pointed out, *"We talk about truth with students, but they notice us lying to inspectors or misusing money."* This illustrates the ethical dilemma faced by educators who are tasked with teaching moral values, but whose actions may contradict those values. From a Kantian perspective, this is morally unacceptable: If educators do not live up to the moral standards they teach, they weaken the ethical lessons they are attempting to impart to students (Carr, 2000; Munene, 2016). Munene (2016) argues that moral integrity should be consistent across all facets of life; therefore, educators must model the ethical behavior they wish to instill in their students.

#### 4.4 Organizational Challenges to Effective Moral Education

The study found that institutional structures posed significant barriers to the effective teaching of moral education in CRE. Teachers noted that the overwhelming focus on examinable subjects left little time for meaningful moral discussions. Furthermore, many teachers reported insufficient training in ethics, counseling, and dialogical pedagogy. One participant explained, *"We are asked to teach morals, but we do not get the necessary support."* This reflects the broader systemic issue where teachers are expected to fulfill the moral education mandate, but are not given the tools or institutional backing to do so effectively.

Moreover, teachers felt that the emphasis on discipline from school administration often overshadowed the importance of ethical teaching. The lack of experiential moral learning opportunities, such as debates, volunteering, or student-initiated projects, was also highlighted as a significant gap. Parkes and Heslop (2013) argue that moral education in schools should be integrated into all aspects of the school environment, including clear rules, active leadership, and community involvement. Kantian ethics supports this view, asserting that respect for individuals should be a foundational value across all areas of society, not merely hoped for but actively promoted.

After considering the findings, the study suggests that the leading cause of moral failure in schools is not student misbehavior, but the neglect of moral education within the institutional system. Character education is often undervalued, under-supported, and treated as an overlooked aspect of teaching. If Kant were to observe the current situation, he would likely focus not on the behavior of students but on the lack of an environment that fosters the practice of moral duties.

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

In summary, the teaching methods used in Christian Religious Education (CRE) are not aligned with the primary goals of moral education. The primary focus on teachers giving instructions and preparing students for exams does not encourage learners to think about ethics. Moral guidance is still divided, responds to problems as they arise, and is not supported well by codes of ethics, regular examples of ethical behavior, or strong policies on gender-based violence. For this reason, CRE is usually taught in a theoretical way instead of being an active, life-changing process. CRE should be redesigned to support ethical and responsible youth by focusing on dialogue, participation, and responding to their unique social contexts, so they can learn values, question unfairness, and use moral rules in their lives.

### 5.2 Recommendations

CRE teaching should incorporate dialogical pedagogy in the classroom, where students can engage in discussions, questioning, and debates to develop their moral thinking. Teachers can help students develop critical thinking skills and deepen their understanding of moral principles by encouraging them to engage actively in discussions on moral matters.

Moreover, character education must be integrated into the school environment. This can be achieved through the creation of programs, rules, and mentoring systems that reflect the CRE curriculum. These activities should be designed to develop students' character and provide them with opportunities to apply moral values in real-life contexts.

Finally, teachers must receive ongoing training in moral pedagogy, counseling, and character building. They should also adopt professional development initiatives throughout the careers of teachers, so that they are equipped with the appropriate competencies to deliver moral education successfully. Schools can provide a more effective moral classroom experience by enhancing teachers' knowledge base on teaching ethically and providing support to implement effective ethical instruction in practice.

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