

Religious education and people's perception on the subject: A case of selected secondary schools in Lusaka District, Zambia

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Abstract

Overview: Religious education plays a pivotal role globally, reflecting diverse perspectives and practices across continents. In Africa, religious education intertwines with cultural heritage, shaping moral frameworks and societal norms. The study was conducted in Lusaka district, the capital city of Zambia.

Body of Knowledge: The theoretical and practical insights gained from this study contribute to enhancing understanding of the role of religious education in fostering moral and ethical development, promoting intercultural dialogue, and cultivating inclusive educational environments. By addressing the identified challenges and leveraging opportunities for collaboration between schools, families, and communities, stakeholders can work towards creating inclusive educational policies and practices that respect and celebrate religious diversity.

Methods: The study employed both the qualitative and quantitative methods and a descriptive survey design that sampled Head teachers, RE teachers, and Pupils of RE. The sample size for this study was 150. Data was obtained from the respondents by means of interviews and questionnaires. This study used descriptive analysis to analyze the data. Tables, graphs and pie-charts were used in combination with the use of software, MS access and MS Excel to analyze data.

Results: Religious education plays a significant role in shaping students' moral and ethical values. Despite some skepticism about its relevance in a modern, pluralistic society, the majority of participants including pupils, teachers, and parents viewed religious education positively. They believed it fosters tolerance, empathy, and respect for diverse beliefs. However, there were also concerns about the potential for religious education to become doctrinal rather than educational, emphasizing the need for a balanced and inclusive curriculum that respects all faiths.

Recommendation: The study highlighted the importance of training educators to handle religious education in a way that promotes critical thinking and open dialogue, rather than mere indoctrination.

Keywords: Cultural Diversity; Ethical Leadership; Religious Education; Perception; School

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1. Introduction

Religious education in secondary schools plays a crucial role in shaping students' understanding of religious beliefs, values, and practices within the broader context of their educational journey (Jackson, 2019). It serves as a platform where students explore various religious traditions, ethical dilemmas, and moral principles that influence their personal and social development. In many educational systems, including those in Zambia, religious education is integrated into the curriculum to foster spiritual growth, ethical reasoning, and intercultural understanding among students. Lusaka district, located in the Lusaka Province, the capital city of Zambia and is characterized by cultural diversity and rich religious heritage. The district is a home to various religious communities, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and indigenous African religions, each contributing to the religious landscape of the region. This ethnic diversity provides a unique context for studying how religious education is perceived and practiced within secondary schools, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards religious diversity and education. Ethnic diversity is the existence of people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds or identities. Diversity is about what makes each of us unique and includes our backgrounds, personality, life experiences and beliefs, all of the things that make us who we are (Chitondo & Chanda, 2023).

Historically, religious education in Zambia has evolved alongside shifts in educational policies and societal norms (Chanda, 2023). From the early missionary schools to contemporary public and private institutions, the provision of religious education reflects changing attitudes towards education, religion, and cultural identity in Zambia's post-colonial era. The cultural dimensions of religious education in Lusaka district encompass traditional beliefs, customs, and practices that intersect with formal educational frameworks (Francis & Village, 2013). Incorporating local cultural perspectives into religious education programs enhances relevance and resonance among students, fostering a sense of pride and connection to their cultural heritage. The role of religious institutions and community organizations in shaping educational practices and policies cannot be overlooked. Chanda et al (2023) alluded that religious leaders, community elders, and civil society groups play influential roles in advocating for inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches to religious education, ensuring that local values and traditions are respected and integrated into educational initiatives.

Globalization has also impacted religious education in Zambia, with increased exposure to diverse religious beliefs and practices through media, technology, and global networks (Chanda et al., 2024). This exposure challenges educators to provide comprehensive and balanced perspectives on world religions while promoting critical thinking and cross-cultural understanding among students. The educational philosophy underpinning religious education in Lusaka district emphasizes the holistic development of students' intellectual, emotional, and moral capacities. Integrating religious teachings with academic subjects enables students to explore ethical dilemmas, moral principles, and philosophical perspectives in a structured and supportive environment. Moreover, debates over the secularization of education and the role of religion in public life influence perceptions of religious education (Parker, 2019). Balancing secular educational principles with the recognition of religious diversity requires careful consideration of constitutional rights, educational objectives, and societal expectations. Educational reforms in Zambia aim to enhance the quality and inclusivity of religious education programs through curriculum revisions, teacher training initiatives, and community engagement strategies (Jackson, 2019). These reforms seek to address challenges such as curriculum relevance, teacher preparedness, and student engagement, ensuring that religious education meets the evolving needs of students and society.

Chitondo et al (2023) explained that the historical context of religious education in Zambia is influenced by colonial legacies and post-independence educational reforms. During the colonial period, mission schools played a significant role in providing education, often integrating religious teachings alongside academic subjects. This historical foundation continues to shape contemporary educational policies and practices, including the provision of religious education within public and private secondary schools. In the post-independence era, Zambia underwent educational reforms aimed at promoting access to quality education for all citizens, regardless of religious affiliation. The government's policies emphasize inclusivity, equity, and respect for religious diversity within the educational framework (Chanda, 2020). These policies seek to balance the promotion of religious values with the principles of secularism and pluralism, ensuring that religious education contributes positively to students' holistic development.

The significance of religious education extends beyond academic learning to encompass broader societal goals, such as promoting social cohesion, tolerance, and respect for human rights (Byrnes & Ging, 2015). By providing students with knowledge about different religions and ethical frameworks, religious education aims to equip them with the skills and attitudes necessary to navigate diverse cultural contexts and contribute meaningfully to society. Research on religious education in Zambia and similar contexts often explores the intersection of religious beliefs, educational practices, and societal values (Chanda & Chitondo, 2023). Studies indicate that religious education can enhance students' critical

thinking, empathy, and understanding of global issues, thereby preparing them to become responsible citizens in a multicultural world.

However, challenges exist in implementing effective religious education programs that cater to diverse pupil's needs and expectations. These challenges include curriculum development, teacher training, access to resources, and community engagement (Dinama, 2016). Educators and policymakers must navigate these complexities to ensure that religious education programs are inclusive, relevant, and aligned with educational goals and societal values. Furthermore, perceptions of religious education among stakeholders, including pupils, teachers, parents, and community leaders, vary widely (Francis & Village, 2013). Some stakeholders view religious education as essential for moral and spiritual development, while others may have concerns about indoctrination, bias, or exclusionary practices within educational settings. Moreover, global trends in education, such as the emphasis on human rights, interfaith dialogue, and global citizenship, intersect with the study's background. These trends underscore the importance of fostering inclusive educational practices that respect religious diversity while promoting universal values of tolerance, respect, and cooperation.

Furthermore, the alignment of religious education with national educational goals and international standards reflects Zambia's commitment to promoting inclusive education and cultural diversity (Chanda & Madoda, 2024). By integrating global best practices and local priorities, religious education programs can contribute to achieving broader educational outcomes and societal development goals. The impact of COVID-19 on religious education has also been profound, requiring educators to adapt teaching methods, curriculum delivery, and student engagement strategies to remote and hybrid learning environments (Jackson, 2019). These adaptations highlight the resilience and flexibility of religious education programs in responding to unforeseen challenges and maintaining continuity in student learning. Public perceptions of religious education in Lusaka district may be influenced by media portrayals, public discourse, and societal attitudes towards religion and education. Addressing misconceptions, promoting transparency, and fostering dialogue with stakeholders are essential for enhancing understanding and support for religious education initiatives. Moreover, the economic factors influencing religious education include funding allocations, resource availability, and financial support for schools, teachers, and educational programs (Francis et al, 2017). Adequate investment in religious education infrastructure and capacity-building initiatives is crucial for ensuring quality education and equitable access for all students in the district. The role of gender in religious education merits attention, as gender norms and expectations may influence students' experiences, participation, and opportunities within educational settings (Chanda, 2024). Promoting gender equity and inclusivity in religious education programs requires addressing stereotypes, promoting positive role models, and ensuring equal access to educational resources and opportunities.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Religious education in secondary schools often sparks debates due to its multifaceted nature, encompassing educational, cultural, and societal dimensions. It serves as a platform where pupils are introduced to religious beliefs, values, and practices, impacting their worldview and moral development (Jackson, 2019). However, perceptions regarding the role and significance of religious education vary widely among stakeholders, including pupils, educators, parents, and policymakers. One of the central issues lies in the diversity of religious beliefs and practices within educational settings. In Zambia, like in many other countries, there may be tensions between religious freedom, secularism, and state policies regarding education (Chanda et al, 2023). These tensions can influence how religious education is implemented and perceived within secondary schools, affecting the curriculum content and pedagogical approaches used by educators. Another significant aspect of the problem statement is the educational outcomes associated with religious education. Research suggests that religious education can contribute positively to students' moral development, empathy, and understanding of diverse cultures and beliefs (Ibid, 2019; Francis et al., 2017). However, there is also concern about the potential for indoctrination or exclusionary practices that may marginalize students from minority religious or non-religious backgrounds. Furthermore, the effectiveness of religious education programs in achieving educational objectives and fostering social cohesion is often debated. Some studies indicate that well-designed religious education programs can promote tolerance and respect for diversity, while others argue that they may reinforce stereotypes or perpetuate societal divisions (Parker, 2019). Hence, to address these challenges effectively, the study saw a pressing need for a comprehensive research that captures the multifaceted nature of perceptions on religious education.

1.2. The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to thoroughly investigate religious education and people's perception on the subject in the selected secondary schools in Lusaka district, Zambia.

1.3. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- Identify factors influencing learners' perception of religious education in the selected secondary schools in Lusaka district, Zambia.
- Examine the impact of religious education on moral and ethical development among pupils in selected secondary schools in Lusaka district, Zambia.
- Evaluate the measures put in place by schools for religious education to effectively teach the subject in selected secondary schools in Lusaka district, Zambia.

1.4. Conceptual Framework

Religious education (RE) serves a multifaceted purpose within the educational landscape. One of its primary aims is to promote religious literacy and understanding among students. RE seeks to provide learners with knowledge about various world religions, belief systems, and ethical philosophies. Through the study of religious traditions, texts, rituals, and histories, students gain insights into the diverse cultural and spiritual tapestry of the world. This knowledge equips them with the ability to engage thoughtfully with individuals from different religious backgrounds, fostering respect, empathy, and dialogue in an increasingly interconnected global society (Jackson, 2017). The two RE syllabuses at senior secondary school level have for decades now been sources of division as they trigger various attitudes among RE teachers (Mumba, 2018). Attitudes, unfortunately, can be positive, neutral or negative. Attitudes also come and go. This means that the attitudes that the teachers of RE exhibit towards the subject may either contribute to the growth and development of the subject or lead to its stagnation and failure to meet learners' needs. On one hand, a positive attitude towards the subject helps the teachers and pupils develop high esteem, thereby improving the teaching and learning, performance and achievement. On the other hand, a negative attitude leads to low esteem and poor performance and achievement by the teachers and learners, thereby making the subject lose its position and status as provided for in the national education policy document. Phiri (2017) noted that teachers' attitudes towards their profession have an effect on pupil's academic performance. They are required to have higher levels of professionalism because of rapidly changing circumstances. We live in an age of great transition, great social and economic turbulence which calls for major changes in our perceptions, attitudes and values.

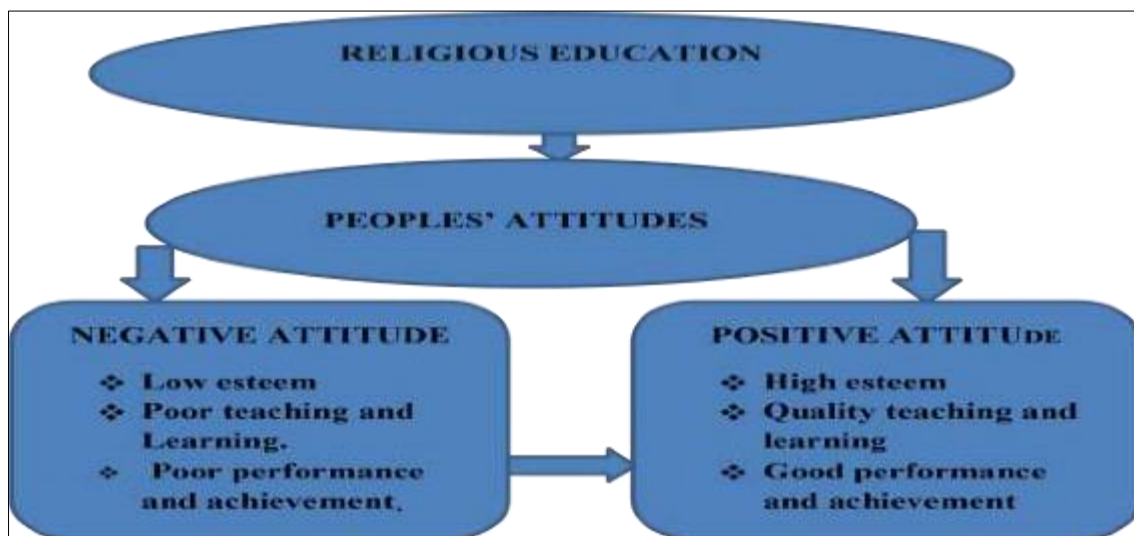


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study holds significant importance as it can shed light on the diverse perceptions of religious education and the factors influencing these perceptions, ultimately contributing to the development of more inclusive, equitable, and effective religious education programs that promote tolerance, understanding, and moral development in our pluralistic and globalized society. The study has also the potential to impact educational policy and practice, fostering a more harmonious coexistence of different belief systems and secular perspectives.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Study Design

This study used a descriptive research design in order to collect qualitative and quantitative data from the participants (respondents) on religious education and people's perception on the subject in the selected secondary schools in Lusaka district, Zambia. Banda et al (2017), states that descriptive study regulates and reports the way things are and generally involves assessing attitudes, opinions towards individuals, organizations and procedures.

2.2. Research Site

This study was conducted in Lusaka district, the capital city of Zambia from 5 selected secondary schools from which the participants were selected for the study.

2.3. Population, Sample and Sampling Procedure

The population for the study comprised Head teachers, RE teachers and RE pupils giving a target population of one thousand five hundred (1500). The sample size involved a total of 150 respondents which included 5 Head teachers, one coming from each selected school. 10 RE teachers, two coming from each selected school. 135 RE pupils, twenty-seven coming from each selected school. The study used purposive sampling to select schools and Head teachers while simple random sampling was used to select RE teachers and pupils.

2.4. Data Analysis

This study used descriptive analysis to analyze the data. In this study, data was analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis, by identifying the emerging themes from the study findings. The responses from the semi-structured interview guides was coded and grouped into themes which was used for data analysis. Additionally, data collected was presented on the analytical tools such as tables, figures and charts.

2.5. Ethical Issues

An introductory letter was sought from DEBS office Lusaka district to permit the study to collect data from the targeted schools. The study upheld research ethical considerations such as voluntary participation of the respondents, confidentiality, honesty, right of privacy and so forth in a manner that the research would not disrupt the daily routine of the business activities under research. The researchers briefed the participants at the beginning and at the end of the study and assured the participants that the data collected was purely for academic purposes only. Furthermore, the main objective of gathering such information was made clear to the respondents.

3. Results and Discussions

The following findings and discussions were presented according to set research objectives:

3.1. Factors Influencing Learners' Perception of Religious Education in Selected Secondary Schools

The study findings indicated that factors influencing learners' perception of religious education in secondary schools can be diverse and multifaceted. Cultural and Societal Context was at 20%, Family Influence 5%, School Environment 10%, Teacher Characteristics 5%, Curriculum Content 10%, Personal Factors 15%, Educational Policies 10%, Socioeconomic Factors 15%, and Historical and Political Context 10%.

The findings indicated that cultural and societal context plays a significant role in shaping learners' perceptions of religious education in secondary schools. These contexts encompass a range of influences, including family beliefs, community values, and broader societal attitudes towards religion. In regions where religious practice is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric, pupils may view religious education as an essential and respected part of their schooling (Chanda, 2023). Conversely, in more secular or religiously diverse areas, learners might perceive such education with skepticism or indifference, influenced by a societal emphasis on pluralism and personal choice. Additionally, the representation and inclusivity of various religious traditions within the curriculum can impact students' engagement and acceptance. If the curriculum appears biased or exclusive, it might alienate pupils from minority faiths or those with secular views, fostering a sense of exclusion or resistance (Byrnes & Ging, 2015). Furthermore, peer influences and the prevailing school culture can either reinforce or challenge the attitudes students bring from their home environments. Teachers' approaches to religious education, whether they promote critical thinking and open dialogue or adhere strictly to doctrinal teachings, also significantly shape students' perceptions.

Overall, the interplay of these cultural and societal factors creates a complex and dynamic environment that profoundly influences how students perceive and engage with religious education in secondary schools.

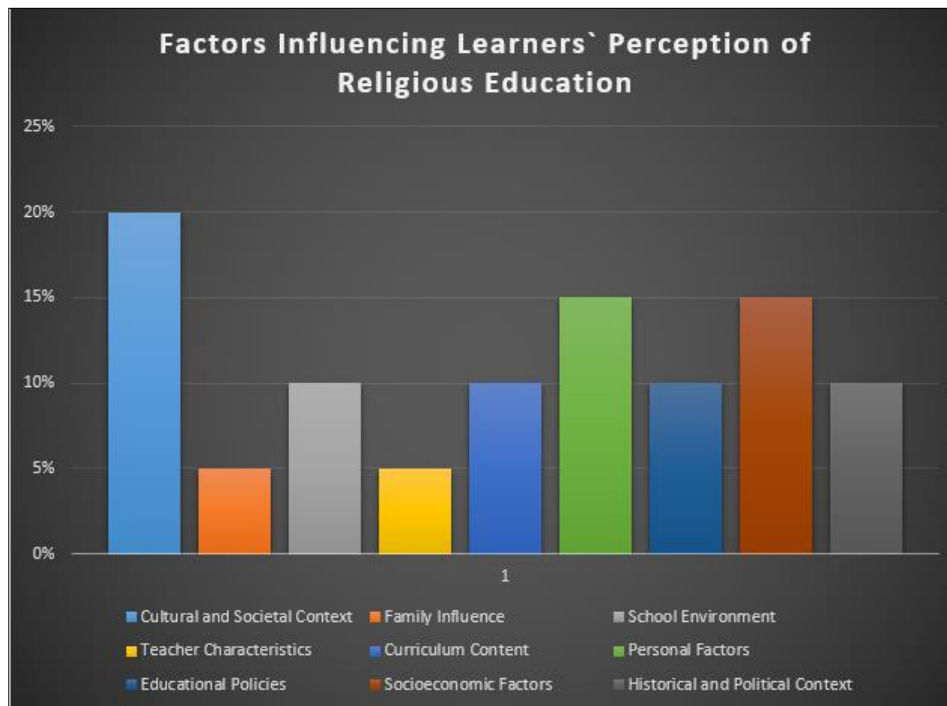


Figure 2 Factors Influencing Learners' Perception of Religious Education in Selected Secondary Schools

Additionally, RE teachers alluded that the religious beliefs, practices, and values upheld by a family significantly impact a student's attitude towards religious education.

“For instance, pupils from devout religious families often exhibit a positive disposition towards religious studies, seeing it as an extension of their home environment and a reinforcement of their faith. Conversely, pupils from secular or non-religious households may approach religious education with indifference or skepticism, viewing it as irrelevant to their personal beliefs”.

Moreover, parental attitudes towards religion and education also play a pivotal role; parents who prioritize religious upbringing are likely to encourage active participation and interest in religious education. The degree of parental involvement in a child's education, including discussions about religious topics at home, further reinforces or diminishes the child's perception of religious education. Besides, familial cultural background and the religious diversity within a family can either enrich a learner's understanding and appreciation of religious studies or lead to conflicts and confusion, influencing their overall perception of the subject in school. Thus, family influence is a multifaceted factor that shapes how learners perceive and engage with religious education in secondary schools.

Moving on, the study results showed that the school environment significantly influences learners' perception of religious education in secondary schools, shaping their attitudes and engagement with the subject. A positive and inclusive school culture that respects and celebrates diverse religious beliefs fosters an open-minded and appreciative approach to religious education. When schools provide a safe and supportive atmosphere, students are more likely to feel comfortable expressing their views and engaging in discussions about religion. Chanda (2024) added that the physical environment, including well-resourced classrooms and access to religious texts and materials, also plays a crucial role in enhancing the learning experience. Additionally, the attitude and competence of teachers in delivering religious education can profoundly impact students' interest and perception. Teachers who are knowledgeable, respectful, and passionate about the subject can inspire students and encourage a deeper understanding and appreciation of religious diversity. Conversely, a negative school environment, marked by intolerance, lack of resources, or unengaged teaching, can lead to disinterest and negative perceptions of religious education among students. Thus, the overall school environment, encompassing cultural, physical, and instructional aspects, is pivotal in shaping learners' perceptions and attitudes towards religious education in secondary schools (Buchowski, 2018).

Furthermore, the study found that effective religious education often hinges on the teacher's knowledge, enthusiasm, and approachability. Teachers with deep subject knowledge and a genuine passion for religious education can inspire and engage students, making the subject more interesting and relevant to their lives (Adebayo, 2020). Conversely, teachers who lack confidence or enthusiasm may struggle to connect with students, leading to disengagement. The teacher's pedagogical skills, including their ability to foster an inclusive classroom environment and employ diverse teaching methods, also play a critical role. Additionally, the teacher's personal attributes, such as empathy, fairness, and the ability to relate to students on a personal level, can create a positive learning atmosphere. When students feel respected and understood, they are more likely to value the lessons and participate actively. Thus, the combination of a teacher's expertise, passion, teaching style, and interpersonal skills collectively shapes students' attitudes towards religious education, highlighting the importance of teacher characteristics in educational outcomes. Also, the inclusivity, relevance, and presentation of the curriculum significantly impact students' engagement and attitudes towards the subject. Adamu (2029) said that a well-rounded curriculum that encompasses diverse religious traditions and encourages critical thinking can foster a more open and appreciative view of religious education. Conversely, a narrow or biased curriculum may lead to disengagement or negative perceptions among students. The alignment of the curriculum with contemporary issues and students' real-life experiences also enhances its relatability and effectiveness. Additionally, the pedagogical approaches embedded within the curriculum, such as interactive and participatory methods, can further influence learners' enthusiasm and perception. Ultimately, the curriculum content's ability to reflect and respect the pluralistic nature of society, while being dynamic and student-centered, is crucial in cultivating a positive perception of religious education among secondary school students.

Respondents also pointed out that personal factors significantly influence learners' perceptions of religious education in secondary schools. These factors encompass a range of individual characteristics and experiences, including personal beliefs, family background, and prior exposure to religious practices. For instance, students from devout religious families may approach religious education with a more positive and engaged mindset compared to those from secular or different religious backgrounds. Additionally, personal interest and intrinsic motivation play crucial roles; learners who find the subject matter relevant to their personal lives are more likely to perceive it positively (Ibrahim, 2021). Cognitive factors, such as intellectual curiosity and critical thinking skills, also impact how students interpret and value religious education. Emotional factors, including past experiences with religion and current attitudes toward religious institutions, further shape perceptions. Peer influence and the social environment within the school can either reinforce or challenge individual beliefs, affecting learners' engagement and attitudes towards the subject. Overall, personal factors create a complex, multifaceted influence on how religious education is perceived, highlighting the importance of considering individual differences in educational strategies.

Head teachers narrated that national or regional policies regarding religious education can impact its delivery and perception. For instance, mandatory religious education might be viewed differently compared to elective courses. They explained that these policies can dictate the curriculum content, the degree of emphasis on religious studies, and the inclusivity of diverse religious perspectives. For instance, in schools where policies mandate a comprehensive and balanced approach to religious education, students may develop a more inclusive and respectful understanding of various faiths. Conversely, policies that prioritize one religion over others can lead to a perception of bias and exclusivity, potentially fostering intolerance or disinterest among learners. Furthermore, the manner in which policies address the integration of religious education with other subjects, the training and attitudes of teachers, and the availability of resources also play crucial roles (Chanda & Siyunda, 2023). Policies that promote critical thinking and intercultural dialogue within religious education tend to positively influence learners' perceptions, encouraging them to appreciate the subject as integral to their overall education and personal development. In contrast, rigid or outdated policies can make religious education seem irrelevant or dogmatic, impacting student engagement and perception negatively. Therefore, educational policies are pivotal in shaping how learners view and value religious education in secondary schools, influencing both their academic and personal growth.

Further, the teachers alluded that socioeconomic factors play a significant role in shaping learners' perceptions of religious education in selected secondary schools. These factors include the economic status, educational background, and occupational prestige of learners' families, which collectively impact their attitudes towards religious studies. The respondents mentioned that:

“Pupils from affluent families often have access to better educational resources and environments that may either support or undermine the value placed on religious education”.

Conversely, learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds might view religious education as either a critical moral foundation or a less relevant subject compared to economically advantageous disciplines. Additionally, the educational level of parents influences perceptions, as parents with higher education levels might encourage critical thinking and a

broader understanding of religious studies, while those with less education might focus on the traditional or doctrinal aspects. Occupational prestige also affects learners' views, with those from families engaged in professions valuing analytical skills possibly seeing religious education as less practical. Furthermore, socioeconomic disparities can affect the availability of religious education resources and extracurricular activities, leading to varied experiences and perceptions among students (Chanda, 2023). Therefore, the socioeconomic context profoundly influences how learners perceive the importance, relevance, and approach to religious education in their academic and personal lives.

Historically, the role of religion in education has evolved, influenced by periods of colonization, secularization, and shifts in political power. For instance, in countries where religious institutions were integral to the establishment of formal education, religious education often held a central place in the curriculum. However, the rise of secularism and subsequent policies aimed at separating church and state have led to a re-evaluation of this role (Jackson, 2018). Politically, contemporary debates on multiculturalism, national identity, and religious pluralism further influence how religious education is perceived and implemented. In societies with a history of religious conflict or dominance by a particular faith, there might be a push towards a more inclusive or neutral approach to avoid bias and promote social cohesion. Conversely, in regions where religion is intertwined with national identity or the political establishment, religious education might be perceived as a means of preserving cultural heritage and values. These historical and political dynamics create a complex landscape where learners' perceptions of religious education are continually shaped by the interplay between past legacies and present-day political agendas (Chitondo et al, 2024). By considering these factors, educators and policymakers can better understand and address the varied perceptions of religious education among secondary school learners.

3.2. The Impact of Religious Education on Moral and Ethical Development among Pupils in Selected Secondary Schools

The findings on learners' perceptions of how religious education contributes to their ethical and moral development. The following frequency table categorizes responses based on pupils' viewpoints.

Table 1 Impact of Religious Education on Moral and Ethical Development among Pupils

Perception of Contribution to Ethical and Moral Development	Frequency
Strongly Contributes	40
Contributes	30
Neutral	15
Does Not Contribute	10
Strongly Does Not Contribute	5

This frequency table illustrates learners' perceptions of the extent to which religious education contributes to their ethical and moral development. A significant majority (40%) strongly believe that religious education strongly contributes to their ethical and moral development, while another substantial group (30%) believes it contributes. However, there are also students who are neutral (15%), feel it does not contribute (10%), or strongly feel it does not contribute (5%). These findings highlight the perceived role of religious education in shaping learners' ethical and moral values. The high proportion of students who perceive a positive contribution underscores the potential of religious education to foster important aspects of character development. It also suggests opportunities for educators to reinforce and build upon these perceived benefits in curriculum design and implementation. Figure 3 below examined the frequency of learners' participation in religious activities outside of school. The following frequency table categorizes responses based on participation levels:

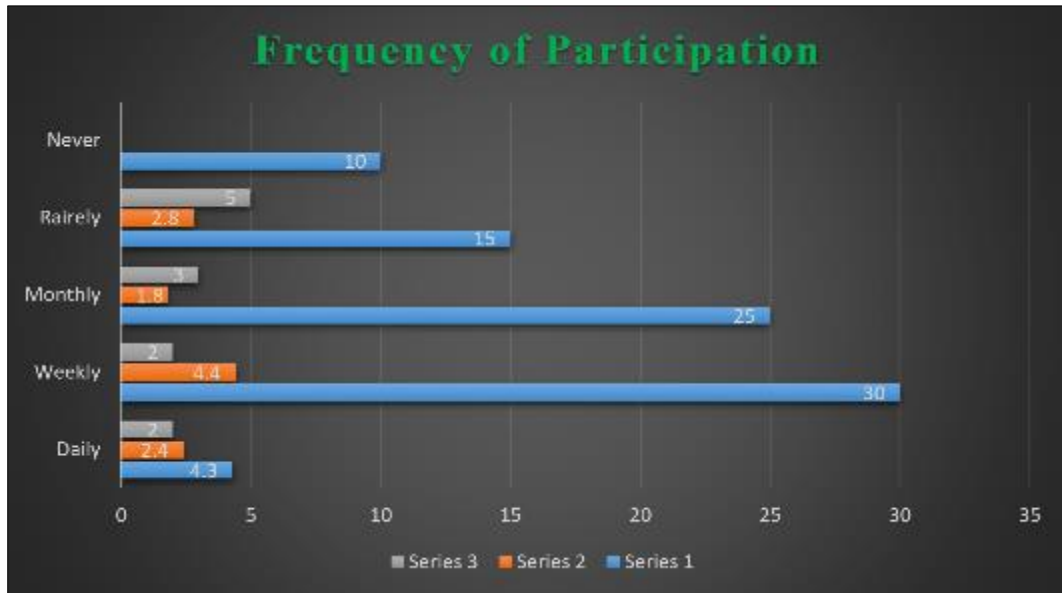


Figure 3 Frequency of Participation in Religious Activities

This figure above shows the distribution of pupils based on their frequency of participating in religious activities outside of school. The majority of students participate weekly (30%) or monthly (25%), indicating a significant level of engagement with religious practices outside of the educational setting. A smaller percentage participate daily (20%), while some participate rarely (15%) or never (10%). The frequency of participation in religious activities outside of school provides context for understanding learners’ broader religious engagement beyond the formal curriculum. It underscores the significance of religious beliefs and practices in learners’ lives and highlights the potential synergy between formal religious education in schools and informal religious practices within communities. Educators and policymakers can consider these insights when designing holistic approaches to religious education that encompass both educational and community-based dimensions.

3.3. Measures Put In Place by Schools for Religious Education to Effectively Teach the Subject in Selected Secondary Schools

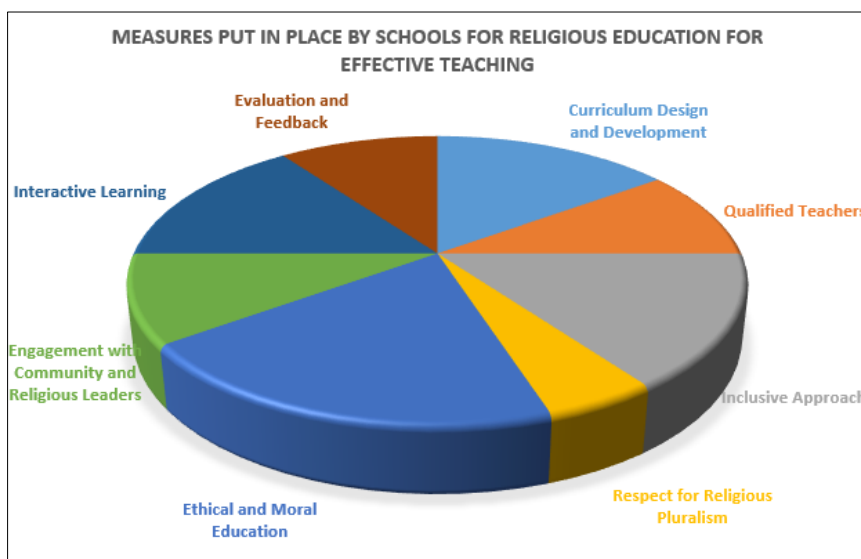


Figure 4 Measures Put In Place by Schools for Religious Education to Effectively Teach the Subject

From the study findings, measures were suggested on how best RE can effectively be taught in secondary schools in Lusaka district. Curriculum Design and Development was at 15%, Qualified Teachers at 10%, Inclusive Approach at 15%, Respect for Religious Pluralism at 5%, Ethical and Moral Education at 20%, Engagement with Community and

Religious Leaders at 10%, Interactive Learning at 15%, and Evaluation and Feedback at 10%. Figure 4 below summarizes these measures.

According to the respondents, curriculum design and development for religious education in schools involves a comprehensive and thoughtful approach to ensure that the subject is taught effectively. This process includes establishing clear educational goals that align with both national standards and the school's religious ethos (Hassan, 2021). Schools implement a structured curriculum that integrates religious studies with other academic subjects, promoting interdisciplinary learning. They also emphasize the inclusion of diverse religious perspectives to foster a comprehensive understanding and respect for different beliefs. Effective measures include ongoing professional development for teachers, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to deliver the content engagingly and sensitively. Additionally, schools often incorporate experiential learning opportunities, such as field trips to places of worship and interactions with religious leaders, to provide students with real-world insights into various faiths. Assessment methods are designed to evaluate not only students' knowledge but also their ability to apply religious principles in everyday life (Chanda, 2024). Regular curriculum reviews ensure that the content remains relevant and responsive to contemporary issues. By prioritizing these elements, schools aim to create a balanced and inclusive religious education program that nurtures students' spiritual growth and ethical development.

Additionally, head teachers narrated that schools aim to employ teachers who are qualified and trained in religious education. They should have knowledge not only of the subject matter but also of effective teaching methods for imparting religious understanding and tolerance. They further said that qualified teachers play a crucial role in the effective delivery of religious education (RE) in schools. Their deep understanding of various religious traditions, beliefs, and practices, coupled with their pedagogical skills, ensures that students receive a comprehensive and balanced education. Chanda (2023) explained that qualified RE teachers are adept at creating an inclusive classroom environment where diverse viewpoints are respected and explored. They employ a range of teaching methods, from discussions and debates to immersive experiences, to engage students and foster critical thinking. Furthermore, these educators are equipped to handle sensitive topics with care and respect, promoting an atmosphere of mutual understanding and tolerance. By continuously updating their knowledge through professional development and staying abreast of current religious and ethical issues, qualified teachers enhance the curriculum's relevance and resonance with students. Their ability to connect religious studies with broader social, cultural, and moral contexts helps students appreciate the subject's importance in understanding the world and fostering global citizenship (Jackson & Davis, 2020). Consequently, the presence of qualified teachers is a key measure in ensuring that religious education is taught effectively and meaningfully in schools.

Moving on, RE teachers pointed out that RE in schools often takes an inclusive approach, covering a variety of world religions and belief systems. This helps pupils understand different perspectives and promotes respect for diversity. An inclusive approach in religious education involves implementing measures that ensure all students, regardless of their religious backgrounds, feel respected and included in the learning process (Kaunda, 2019). Schools adopting this approach typically foster a multicultural and multi-faith curriculum, highlighting the common values shared across different religions while respecting their unique beliefs and practices. Teachers are trained to create an environment of mutual respect and understanding, promoting open dialogue and critical thinking about religious topics. Classrooms might feature a diverse range of religious texts and artifacts, and celebrations of various religious festivals are encouraged to enhance cultural awareness and empathy among students (Tegegne, 2005). Additionally, schools may implement policies that allow for religious accommodations, such as flexible scheduling for prayer times or dietary requirements. By emphasizing inclusivity, these educational measures aim to build a cohesive and harmonious school community that values diversity and fosters a deep appreciation for the pluralistic nature of society (Kwame, 2018).

The study further noted that respect for religious pluralism in schools is a critical measure for effectively teaching religious education, fostering an inclusive environment that honors diverse beliefs and practices. Schools implement this through a curriculum that covers a broad spectrum of religions, ensuring balanced representation and avoiding favoritism towards any single faith. Educators are trained to handle religious topics sensitively and respectfully, encouraging open dialogue and critical thinking (Ngoma, 2021). Schools also provide platforms for interfaith activities, such as student-led discussions, guest lectures from various religious leaders, and cultural exchange programs, promoting mutual understanding and respect. Furthermore, policies accommodating religious holidays, dietary restrictions, and dress codes are established, ensuring that students from all religious backgrounds feel respected and included. These measures collectively aim to cultivate a climate of respect, empathy, and coexistence, essential for students to appreciate the rich tapestry of global religious traditions. Additionally, ethical and moral education in schools, as a complementary measure to religious education, aims to create a holistic approach to teaching values and principles (Chanda et al, 2023). Schools often integrate ethical and moral education within their curricula to ensure students develop a well-rounded understanding of various belief systems and their associated moral frameworks. This

integration helps students appreciate and respect diverse perspectives while grounding them in universal ethical principles such as honesty, integrity, compassion, and justice. By including discussions on real-life scenarios, schools encourage students to critically analyze and apply ethical theories and moral reasoning in their daily lives. Owen (2020) pointed out that the incorporation of service learning projects, community service activities, and character education programs fosters practical experience in ethical decision-making and empathy. Teachers are often trained to facilitate open, inclusive dialogues that respect all religious and philosophical viewpoints, promoting an environment of mutual respect and understanding. This comprehensive approach not only enhances religious education by contextualizing it within a broader ethical framework but also prepares students to navigate the complexities of a multicultural world with a strong moral compass.

Further, the head teachers commented that engagement with community and religious leaders is a crucial measure adopted by schools to enhance the effectiveness of religious education. This collaborative approach involves inviting leaders from various religious communities to participate in classroom discussions, offer guest lectures, and provide real-world insights into their faiths. They stated that:

“By incorporating the perspectives of these leaders, schools can present a more comprehensive and authentic view of different religions, fostering a deeper understanding and respect among pupils. This engagement helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical experience, allowing pupils to appreciate the lived experiences and cultural contexts of various religious practices”.

Additionally, community and religious leaders can support curriculum development, ensuring that the content is accurate, relevant, and sensitive to the diverse beliefs of the student body. This partnership also extends to extracurricular activities, where leaders might organize field trips to places of worship or participate in interfaith dialogues, further enriching the students' learning experience. Musakanya & Chanda (2024) supported this finding by stating that through Physical Education, learners acquire the knowledge, skills, right attitudes and values towards the pursuit of a lifelong physically active and healthy lifestyle. Overall, the involvement of community and religious leaders not only enhances the educational content but also promotes inclusivity, respect, and mutual understanding among students from different religious backgrounds.

The pupils explained that incorporating interactive methods such as debates, group discussions, role-playing, and multimedia presentations can make RE classes more engaging and foster active participation. They added that:

“Interactive learning in religious education encompasses various strategies that schools implement to enhance the teaching and understanding of the subject. This approach emphasizes active engagement and participation from students, moving away from traditional rote learning methods. Schools integrate technology, such as interactive whiteboards and educational software, to create dynamic and immersive learning environments”.

Collaborative activities like group discussions, role-playing, and debates are encouraged to foster critical thinking and personal reflection on religious topics. Field trips to places of worship and guest lectures from religious leaders provide real-world insights and experiential learning opportunities. Additionally, schools often employ transformative strategies such as project-based learning, where pupils undertake in-depth investigations of religious themes, allowing them to explore and express their understanding creatively. Transformative pedagogies refers to instructional techniques that go beyond conventional approaches. These practices strive to improve the learning experience by adding modern viewpoints, technology improvements, and an approach centred on the learner (Alma et al, 2024). These interactive methods aim to make religious education more engaging, relevant, and meaningful, ultimately fostering a deeper appreciation and respect for diverse religious beliefs and practices.

The study also established that evaluation and feedback are essential measures implemented by schools to effectively teach Religious Education (RE). These processes involve continuous assessment and constructive feedback mechanisms to enhance learning outcomes and ensure that the educational objectives of RE are met. Evaluation in RE includes various forms of assessments, such as formative assessments, summative assessments, and self-assessments. Formative assessments, including quizzes, class discussions, and reflection journals, help in gauging students' understanding and engagement with the subject matter on an ongoing basis, allowing teachers to adjust their instructional strategies accordingly. Summative assessments, such as exams, projects, and presentations, evaluate the students' overall grasp of the curriculum at the end of a unit or term. Kikwato et al (2023) narrated that self-assessment encourages students to reflect on their learning journey, fostering a deeper personal connection to the subject. Feedback, both verbal and written, is provided to guide students in their learning process, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement. This feedback is often personalized and aims to support students in developing critical thinking, empathy, and a nuanced understanding of different religious beliefs and practices. By incorporating these measures, schools ensure that RE is

taught effectively, promoting not only academic achievement but also personal and spiritual growth among students (Grimmitt, 2020). These measures collectively aim to create a balanced and informative religious education program that respects the beliefs of all students while providing them with a comprehensive understanding of religion and its role in society.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study underscores the critical role of Religious Education (RE) in shaping students' understanding and perceptions of religious diversity, tolerance, and cultural heritage. It highlights that while RE remains a foundational aspect of the curriculum, there are varying perceptions among students, educators, and parents regarding its relevance and effectiveness in contemporary society. The article emphasizes the need for curriculum reform that accommodates pluralistic views and promotes critical thinking skills to navigate religious and cultural complexities. Additionally, it calls for further research to explore the impact of RE on broader social cohesion and ethical development within Zambia's educational framework. Overall, the conclusion underscores RE as a pivotal subject for nurturing informed, tolerant citizens capable of engaging meaningfully in Zambia's diverse religious landscape.

Recommendations

The following are action points that should be taken on the basis of the findings of this study:

- Curriculum Development and Review:
 - Engage stakeholders, including religious leaders, educators, and community members, in the curriculum development process to promote a balanced and respectful portrayal of various faith traditions.
 - Introduce modules or supplementary materials that provide insights into multiple religious traditions, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of religious diversity among students.
- Teacher Training and Professional Development:
 - Implement specialized training programs for teachers focused on religious diversity, intercultural competence, and effective pedagogical strategies in religious education.
 - Provide opportunities for ongoing professional development that includes workshops, seminars, and collaborative learning experiences to enhance teachers' skills in addressing the needs of pupils from diverse religious backgrounds.
- Promotion of Inclusive Classroom Practices:
 - Encourage educators to adopt inclusive teaching practices that respect and celebrate cultural and religious diversity among students.
 - Teachers should create a classroom environment that values open dialogue, mutual respect, and critical inquiry into religious beliefs and practices, promoting tolerance and understanding among students.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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