



The effects of discontinuity of Religious Education in primary schools: A case study of Dzwerani Village

Avheani Carol Sambula¹ , Hundzukani P. Khosa²  &
Takalani Samuel Mashau¹ 

¹ Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, University of Venda, South Africa.

² The Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society. Faculty of Theology, North West University, Potchefstroom. South Africa.

ABSTRACT

Before South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, public schools routinely incorporated Christian-oriented Religious Instruction, including daily prayers and Bible-based teaching, across primary and secondary levels. With the adoption of a secular constitutional framework, confessional Religious Instruction was discontinued and replaced by Religious Education embedded within broader learning areas, such as Life Orientation. Although this shift aimed to promote religious freedom and inclusivity, it also altered learners' formal engagement with structured moral and religious content. This study examined the implications of the absence of structured Religious Education in primary schools in Dzwerani village, Limpopo Province. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through open-ended questionnaires administered to key stakeholders, including parents, teachers, school principals, and a local religious leader. The findings indicated widespread concern regarding the discontinuity of formal Religious Education, with participants associating its absence with behavioural challenges among learners, including bullying and a perceived decline in moral guidance. Respondents expressed strong support for the reintroduction or strengthening of an inclusive and non-confessional Religious Education programme within the national curriculum. It concludes that a critical reconsideration of Religious Education policy and practice is necessary to balance constitutional principles with learners' holistic developmental needs, particularly in rural communities. This study contributes to existing academic knowledge by improving understanding of how religious and moral education influences the character formation, social behaviour, and holistic development of learners. The study's recommendations included the reintroduction of structured, inclusive religious education in primary schools.

Keywords: Religious Education, Moral Development, Primary Schools, Social Cohesion, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, Religious Education has historically shaped the moral and social character of schooling. In 1994, before the democratic changes, public schools had Christian-oriented Religious Education as part of their daily routines. They taught religious education in their morning assemblies that included communal

CORRESPONDENCE – Avheani Carol Sambula **Email:** 20002805@mvula.univen.ac.za, raveleavheanicarol@gmail.com

PUBLICATION HISTORY - Received : 13th March, 2026 | Accepted: 8th July, 2026 | Published: 23rd September, 2026.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE – Sambula, Avheani Carol, Hundzukani P. Khosa, and Takalani Samuel Mashau. "The effects of discontinuity of Religious Education in primary schools: A case study of Dzwerani Village." *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 12, no.7 (2026):320 – 331 <https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.20261276>

COPYRIGHT AND LICENSING - © 2026 The Author(s). Published and Maintained by Noyam Journals.

This is an open access article under the CCBY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

prayer and Bible study. During this time, most schools began their week with a communal prayer. According to Chidester, Christianity was the only religion dominating the formal curriculum, reflecting the broader social-political context during the time.¹ Religious education was aimed at nurturing learners within a predominantly Christian moral framework; it was largely confessional. Public education underwent a significant change after the arrival of democracy in 1994 and the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.² This constitution emphasised freedom of religion, belief, opinion, equality and human dignity. In alignment with this, the Department of Education developed a new policy that replaced confessional religious education in public schools with religious education. This was implemented within existing subjects such as Life Orientation.³ The purpose of this transformation was to avoid indoctrination while promoting religious diversity, inclusivity, and constitutional neutrality.⁴

Arthur and Halstead & Taylor argued that religious education continues to play a vital role in fostering moral development, ethics and intercultural understanding, regardless of the inclusivity and respect for diversity affirmed by the policy framework.⁵ According to scholars such as Kohlberg and Nucci & Narvaez, it is noted that, according to the moral and character education literature on children, the majority of children develop values and social skills in primary schools.⁶ If ethical questions and religious views are properly addressed, the moral reasoning and pro-social behaviour of learners can be positively affected. This study explores the effects of the discontinuity of structured Religious Education in primary schools in Dzwerani village, Limpopo Province. The authors observed the community and found that there are several behavioural challenges amongst children, especially bullying and aggression. Although these kinds of behaviours are caused by several things and cannot be solely blamed on the absence of religious education, some members of the community argue that moral and spiritual guidance can positively affect the character formation and discipline of learners. Scholarly work by Halstead & Taylor and Nucci & Narvaez affirms that structured ethical dialogue and value-based education can contribute positively to conflict resolution skills, social responsibility, and enhance empathy amongst learners.⁷

Regardless of the South African comprehensive policy framework on religion and education, empirical research examining how these reforms are experienced in rural contexts remains limited. The majority of existing studies prioritise the national policy debates and urban settings.⁸ Research focused on rural communities such as Dzwerani village may present a unique dynamic influenced by local cultural traditions and strong community-based religious identities. This study aims to examine community perceptions of the relevance of religious education and its potential for reintegration in Dzwerani primary schools. The research will contribute to the continuous scholarly and policy discussions concerning the role of religious education in enhancing social cohesion, moral development and inclusive citizenship within South Africa's constitutional democracy.

¹ David Chidester, *Religion: Material Dynamics* (California: Univ of California Press, 2018).

² Republic of South Africa, "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa," *Government Gazette* 378, no. 17678 (1996).

³ Department of Education, "National Policy on Religion and Education," *Government Gazette* 25495 59 (2003).

⁴ Chidester, *Religion: Material Dynamics*; Robert Jackson, *Signposts-Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious World Views in Intercultural Education* (Council of Europe, 2014); Jackson, *Signposts-Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious World Views in Intercultural Education*.

⁵ J. Arthur, "Education with Character: The Moral Economy of Schooling," *Routledge Falmer Google Schola* 2 (2003): 3–20; J. Mark Halstead and Monica J Taylor, "Learning and Teaching about Values: A Review of Recent Research," *Cambridge Journal of Education* 30, no. 2 (June 2000): 169–202, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713657146>.

⁶ Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development/1 The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice* (Harper & Row, 1981); L Nucci and D Narvaez, *Handbook of Moral and Character Education* (Routledge, 2008).

⁷ Halstead and Taylor, "Learning and Teaching about Values: A Review of Recent Research"; Nucci and Narvaez, *Handbook of Moral and Character Education*.

⁸ Chidester, *Religion: Material Dynamics*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Development of Religious Education in South Africa

In South Africa, Religious education was established in close relation to the constantly evolving political authority, schooling management systems, and nation-building projects. Before apartheid, black learners received a much more formal education shaped by Christian mission education. However, this landscape came to an end as the apartheid state consolidated control over African education. This was supported by legislation such as the Bantu Education Act (Act 47 of 1953), which stood for racially differentiated education systems and reconfigured the position of non-state schooling providers.

During apartheid (1948-1994), religious education was formulated through Christian National Education (CNE), where Christian teachings were largely advantaged in public schools, aligning religion with government ideology and racial segregation.⁹ Religious Education in South Africa has changed over time, gradually, simultaneously with broader socio-political transformations. As Kumar noted, before apartheid, schooling in South Africa was predominantly Christian-centred.¹⁰ However, during the time of apartheid (1948–1994), Religious Education existed within the framework of Christian National Education (CNE), as stated above, reinforcing racial segregation and privileging Christian doctrine.¹¹ When the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) was introduced, religious content was integrated into Life Orientation and History rather than being offered as a standalone subject.¹²

Following democratic adjustments in 1994, the state pursued reform of education that focused on inclusivity, human rights, and recognition of diversity. This change was made visible in curriculum restructuring (including the early post-apartheid curriculum reforms often associated with Curriculum 2005), in which religion-related learning was increasingly positioned as part of broader citizenship, values, and diversity outcomes rather than confessional formation. The National Policy on Religion and Education remains the central post-apartheid policy anchor.¹³ It distinguishes between:

Religion Education (an educational programme aimed at “religious literacy” and learning about religion and religious diversity),

Religious Instruction (confessional teaching, which is not part of the official programme of public schools), and

Religious Observances (permitted under conditions of equity and voluntariness).

Chidester situates this policy shift within the broader democratic project of building social cohesion in a religiously diverse society and argues that post-apartheid RE is best understood as teaching and learning about religions and religious diversity rather than privileging one tradition.¹⁴

In the contemporary curriculum, religion is generally not offered as a compulsory standalone subject; instead, it appears mainly through integrative curricular locations, especially Life Orientation, where learner well-being, values, diversity, and citizenship are foregrounded. Empirical and policy-analysis scholarship, however, notes persistent implementation challenges: limited curriculum time, uneven teacher preparation, and the difficulty of realising the policy’s diversity goals in classrooms where teachers’ own mono-religious schooling and training histories may shape practice.¹⁵ In addition, South Africa provides Religion Studies as

⁹ Jane Mary Hofmeyr, *An Examination of the Influence of Christian National Education on the Principles Underlying White and Black Education in South Africa: 1948-1982* (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (South Africa), 1982).; L. P. Tikly, “Education Policy in South Africa since 1948” (University of Glasgow, 1994).

¹⁰ P Pratap Kumar, “Religious Pluralism and Religion Education in South Africa,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 18, no. 3 (2006): 273–93.

¹¹ Hofmeyr, *An Examination of the Influence of Christian National Education on the Principles Underlying White and Black Education in South Africa: 1948-1982*; Tikly, “Education Policy in South Africa since 1948.”

¹² James Holt, *Religious Education in the Secondary School: An Introduction to Teaching, Learning and the World Religions* (Taylor & Francis, 2022).

¹³ Education, “National Policy on Religion and Education.”

¹⁴ Chidester, *Religion: Material Dynamics*.

¹⁵ Zahraa McDonald, “The Classroom, an Inadequate Mechanism for Advancing Diversity via Religion Education in the South African Context,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 28, no. 2 (2015): 202–19; E. O Damons, “Religious Education in South African Public Schools” (Doctoral dissertation, 2016).

a subject option in the Further Education and Training band (Grades 10–12) through national curriculum documentation, framing it as knowledge-oriented and attentive to South African and African religious contexts.

Religious Education, Moral Development, and Social Cohesion

Scholars argue that Religious Education contributes to learners' moral reasoning, ethical awareness, and respect for diversity.¹⁶ It promotes analytical reflection on values such as compassion, justice, and empathy. In multicultural societies, religious education can encourage tolerance and interfaith understanding.¹⁷ However, the concerns regarding teachers' readiness, availability of resources and the balance between inclusivity and religious neutrality continue to persist. In multicultural democracies, RE is generally validated in terms of ethical formation, critical reflection, and social cohesion, goals that are explicitly echoed in South Africa's post-apartheid policy emphasis on "religious literacy" and respect for diversity. South African scholarship highlights that education aimed at religions to support democratic citizenship is not automatically accomplished by curricular inclusion alone; it depends heavily on pedagogy, teacher identity, and classroom conditions.¹⁸ On the other hand, studies that focus on Life Orientation as the main curriculum for religion-related learning argue that the confidence of the teacher and professional formation are crucial. This is because educators usually have partial preparation to conduct inclusive, educationally rigorous interreligious dialogue. Policy critique also points out conceptual tensions: the policy aims to support common values and social justice, but schools may struggle to operationalise "neutrality" without collapsing religion into vague moralism or avoiding it altogether.¹⁹

Religious Freedom and Constitutional Context

The South African Constitution promotes the freedom of religion. It firmly stands against discrimination based on religious beliefs.²⁰ The government maintains equality and neutrality towards religion.²¹ In South Africa, public schools must respect diversity without promoting any indoctrination. Thus, the debate around Religious Education is not about fighting for one religion to be dominant over the other; however, it is about finding ways in which ethical and spiritual dimensions of life can be addressed within a secular, democratic society.

Section 15 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) stands for freedom of religion, belief, and opinion, allowing religious observances at state or state-aided institutions only if they are conducted in accordance with appropriate rules, on an equitable basis, and attendance is free and voluntary. The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 echoes these principles in education-specific legislation. It allows religious practices at public schools under governing-body rules, again requiring equity and voluntariness.

The MEC for Education: KwaZulu-Natal and Others v Pillay (CCT 51/06) (2007) noted that the Constitutional Court emphasised reasonable and accommodative religious and cultural differences in the school context. The court further stated that institutions should be open to adjustments of practices to avoid discrimination, as equality is all about fairness. More recently, litigation around religion in public schools (including the OGD matter) has been used to contest forms of "single-faith branding" and to reinforce the

¹⁶ Semiyu Adejare Aderibigbe et al., "Fostering Tolerance and Respect for Diversity through the Fundamentals of Islamic Education," *Religions* 14, no. 2 (February 3, 2023): 212, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020212>; Nurul Komariah and Ishmatun Nihayah, "Improving the Personality Character of Students through Learning Islamic Religious Education," *At-Tadzkir: Islamic Education Journal* 2, no. 1 (2023): 65–77.

¹⁷ John Chi-Kin Lee, "Curriculum Paradigms and Perspectives of Life and Spiritual Education: Contrast and Diversity," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* (Taylor & Francis, 2020).

¹⁸ McDonald, "The Classroom, an Inadequate Mechanism for Advancing Diversity via Religion Education in the South African Context."

¹⁹ C Serfontein, "Cost Efficiency versus Disruption: Are Traditional Universities Doomed?," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 39, no. 1 (2025): 315–37; J L Van der Walt, "Religion in Education: Is There yet Another Solution?," *Koers: Bulletin for Christian Scholarship* = *Koers: Bulletin Vir Christelike Wetenskap* 75, no. 1 (2010): 79–98.

²⁰ Helena van Coller, "Religious Freedom in South Africa," in *Religious Freedom in Secular States* (Brill | Nijhoff, 2022), 217–33, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004449961_011.

²¹ Robert Audi, "Religion and Democracy: Interactions, Tensions, Possibilities," *Daedalus* 149, no. 3 (2020): 5–24.

constitutional expectation that public schools, as state institutions, may not privilege one religion to the exclusion of others.

Taken together, this jurisprudence promotes the view that the post-1994 debate is not about restoring religious dominance in schooling. Instead, it is about designing curriculum and school practices that recognise the ethical and spiritual dimensions of life. At the same time, remaining consistent with constitutional equality, voluntariness, and state impartiality.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design. This included a structured literature review with empirical data collection through open-ended questionnaires. Qualitative research is a methodology relevant for exploring meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences within specific social and educational contexts.²² Given that the study seeks to understand people's perspectives, a qualitative approach is suitable. It allows for rich, contextualised insight into how individuals interpret policy, practice, and lived realities.

Qualitative research prioritises depth over breadth and emphasises participants' subjective interpretations of social phenomena.²³ In educational research, it is widely used to examine values, beliefs, and identity formation dimensions central to debates over Religious Education, morality, and social cohesion.²⁴ By focusing on participants' perspectives rather than numerical generalisations, the study aims to generate a nuanced understanding rather than statistical inference.

The study employed purposive sampling, a nonprobability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to select participants (teachers, parents, and community leaders) with relevant knowledge or experience related to the phenomenon under investigation.²⁵ Participants were selected based on their involvement in or familiarity with Religious Education within the school context. Purposive sampling enhances the depth and relevance of qualitative inquiry by ensuring that participants can contribute meaningfully to the research objectives rather than representing statistical populations.

Empirical data were collected using open-ended questionnaires as stated above. Although questionnaires are often associated with quantitative research, open-ended formats are frequently used in qualitative studies to elicit descriptive responses and reflective accounts.²⁶ This method enabled participants to express their views freely, without being constrained by predetermined response categories.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within textual data.²⁷ The process involved:

- Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading;
- Initial coding of significant statements;
- Grouping codes into broader thematic categories;
- Reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence and alignment with research objectives;
- Interpreting themes in relation to the literature and theoretical framework.

Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility and suitability in examining perceptions, values, and meaning-making processes—key components in studies of Religious Education and social cohesion.

²² J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Sage, 2018); N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed (Sage, 2018).

²³ Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016).

²⁴ L. Cohen, L. Manion, and K. Morrison, "Research Methods in Education. 8th Edn Routledge," 2018.

²⁵ Lawrence A. Palinkas et al., "Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42, no. 5 (September 6, 2015): 533–44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>; Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*.

²⁶ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners," 2013; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, "Research Methods in Education. 8th Edn Routledge."

²⁷ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101; Lorelli S. Nowell et al., "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): 1609406917733847.

To investigate participants' viewpoints and experiences of the participants surrounding Religious Education in the South African educational setting, this study used a qualitative research design. Because the study aimed to understand how educators, parents, and community leaders interpret the function, goal, and difficulties of religious education in schools, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. In this study, purposive sampling was used to choose participants with relevant experience and knowledge of religious education in the context of schools and communities. 3 teachers, 3 parents, and 2 community leaders made up the sample. The participants are between the ages of 45 and 60 and come from a variety of backgrounds. Their ability to offer knowledgeable viewpoints on religious education and its role in morality, social cohesion, and values formation was the basis for their selection.

Open-ended questionnaires were used to collect data. Participants' knowledge of religious education, its application in schools, perceived advantages and difficulties, and its function in fostering moral development and social cohesion were all covered in the 6 questions that made up the questionnaire. Participants were able to provide detailed answers and articulate their thoughts and experiences in their own words due to the open-ended approach.

Thematic analysis was used to examine the gathered data. As part of the analysis, the researcher reviewed and became acquainted with the responses, noted noteworthy comments, coded recurrent concepts, and arranged these codes into more general themes pertaining to the study's goals. The theoretical framework of the study and the body of research on religious education were then used to interpret the themes identified.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the University of Venda's Research Ethics Committee before the commencement of data collection. The study adhered to established ethical principles that govern research involving human participants, including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Potential participants received detailed information regarding the purpose, procedures, and anticipated outcomes of the research, as well as any potential risks or benefits associated with their involvement. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection began. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or adverse consequences.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, no identifying information was recorded in the data collection instruments. Codes were assigned to participants in place of names to protect their identities. All collected data were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher, and the information obtained was used solely for academic purposes. The findings are reported in aggregate form to avoid the identification of individual participants.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study indicate the collective agreement amongst participants. All participants indicated that Religious Education is essential and relevant within primary school settings. They further stated that it remains beneficial to the learners. The responses of the participants resonate with the existing knowledge that presents Religious Education as an essential component to learners' moral development, social cohesion, and intercultural understanding.²⁸

The authors grouped the findings into three thematic areas: potential benefits of Religious Education, the discontinuation of Religious Education in Dzwerani schools, and inclusivity and diversity in Religious Education. The participants continuously emphasised Religious Education as a vital component of the moral and ethical development of the learners during their formative years. Participant A stated that:

“In Primary School, we lay a solid foundation for moral and social (spiritual) growth which will never crack.”

²⁸ Jackson, *Signposts-Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious World Views in Intercultural Education*; C. C. Haynes, “Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools” (First Amendment Center, 2002).

Therefore, one of the fundamental development phases for children is the primary school phase. This phase is critical for identity formation, value internalisation, and social learning.²⁹ Participants further argued that Religious Education provides a moral framework that guides learners' behaviour and decision-making processes. This reveals a broader literature that suggests that structured engagement with religious and ethical content can enhance moral reasoning and character development.³⁰ Participant B stated that:

“Religious education is relevant. It creates a stable biblical foundation that forms strong values. Discipline, respect, and good character can be formed or moulded from a young age.”

According to Participant B, Religious Education goes beyond providing knowledge of religion, but it also teaches about virtues. These views correspond with the developmental theories that emphasise the importance of early moral formation.³¹ Nucci & Narvaez stated that when learners are exposed to religious narratives and ethical values during childhood, they are most likely to distinguish between right and wrong, which supports ethical decision-making.³² Most participants indicated that Religious Education has the potential to foster empathy, social cohesion and respect in children's lives. Participant C asserted that:

“The discipline, respect and strong character that is formed from kids being taught sound religious education is critical.”

Therefore, when Religious Education is properly implemented, it can contribute to the holistic development of learners by influencing social, emotional, spiritual, moral, intellectual and behavioural growth. In agreement with this, Participant D added by saying:

“Learners learn to respect and have good manners. To know God is very important before they have knowledge of this world.”

The findings of this study correspond with research by Jackson and Gearon that suggests that Religious Education strengthens intercultural competence and mutual understanding in pluralistic societies.³³ When learners are taught about different belief systems, they may develop tolerance and respect for diversity, which is essential, especially in multicultural classroom settings. Participant E further stated that:

“Learning about religion can help learners shape their lives in a positive direction.”

This idea corresponds to Haynes, who argues that Religious Education empowers learners with the reflective knowledge and skills to deal with moral challenges and life decisions.³⁴ To some extent, Religious Education has been associated with the promotion of pro-social behaviour and reducing aggressive conduct, including bullying. This is possible when ethical reflection and empathy-building activities are embedded in the curriculum.³⁵

Overall, participants viewed and explained religious education not merely as educational but as a tool that encourages holistic development in children's lives during the formative years of schooling. All participants preserved Religious Education as a positive influence for moral, social and spiritual development of learners.

²⁹ Nucci and Narvaez, *Handbook of Moral and Character Education*.

³⁰ James Arthur, *Education with Character: The Moral Economy of Schooling* (Psychology Press, 2003); Halstead and Taylor, “Learning and Teaching about Values: A Review of Recent Research.”

³¹ Lawrence Kohlberg, “The Philosophy of Moral Development Vol. 1,” 1981.

³² Nucci and Narvaez, *Handbook of Moral and Character Education*.

³³ Jackson, *Signposts-Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious World Views in Intercultural Education*; Liam Gearon, *MasterClass in Religious Education: Transforming Teaching and Learning* (A&C Black, 2013).

³⁴ Haynes, “Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools.”

³⁵ Halstead and Taylor, “Learning and Teaching about Values: A Review of Recent Research.”

Discontinuity of RE in Dzwerani Schools

Most participants stated that no primary school in Dzwerani currently offers a structured Religious Education as a subject. Despite its benefits, the participants reported that in Dzwerani primary schools they only teach about it in morning assemblies that usually take less than 20 minutes. In all the primary schools around Dzwerani, they only focus on one religion with no formal or structured education. Religious education as a whole is therefore not prioritised. Jackson stands with Religious Education in public schools that is critical, inclusive, and dialogical engagement with multiple traditions rather than devotional practice.³⁶ If schools only focus on communal morning prayers, it may reflect cultural or institutional traditions that do not necessarily foster analytical understanding or interreligious literacy. Participants indicated that the lack of Religious Education may indirectly contribute to behavioural challenges among learners. In rural contexts, where access to counselling services and social workers may be limited, schools often function as primary sites of socialisation and moral guidance.³⁷ Without structured opportunities for ethical discussion and reflection, learners may lack formal platforms to explore issues such as conflict resolution, respect, and personal responsibility.

The findings, therefore, raise questions about the gap between policy ideals and practical implementation. While South Africa's constitutional framework promotes religious freedom and diversity, the absence of structured, inclusive Religious Education may limit learners' opportunities to develop religious literacy and ethical reasoning within a guided academic framework.

Inclusivity and Diversity

All participants emphasised the reinstatement of Religious Education that is inclusive, non-coercive and that aligns with constitutional principles of freedom of religion and equality. This reveals a model of Religious Education that goes beyond a single religious belief, but that supports a multi-faith and dialogical approach.³⁸ Rather than being portrayed and limited to a specific religion, Haynes noted that in diverse societies, Religious Education is usually fair and accommodative of all religions.³⁹ Such approaches are crucial for promoting understanding not only of Christianity but also of other religions such as Islam, African Traditional Religions, Hinduism, etc. The participants corresponded with this view and stated that Religious Education should not favour one religion but should be inclusive and foster mutual respect and constitutional literacy.

If Religious Education is inclusive and diverse, it contributes positively to social cohesion. It also exposes learners to different ethical views while reinforcing shared human values (such as respect, justice and dignity).⁴⁰ Prejudice can be reduced, and democratic citizenship can be strengthened if Religious Education involves critical engagement and is open to dialogue. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that stakeholders in Dzwerani do not favour one religion and advocate for only one religion's return. However, they should advocate for a more inclusive and pedagogically sound Religious Education programme that promotes moral development while respecting diversity.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate how stakeholders perceived the value and potential contribution of RE in Dzwerani primary schools. The results show that participants strongly favor the return of formal religious education, especially as they link it to social cohesiveness, moral growth, responsible behavior, and respect for others. However, the participants did not support a return to confessional religious instruction. Rather, they promoted an inclusive approach to religious education that recognizes the diversity of South

³⁶ Jackson, *Signposts-Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious World Views in Intercultural Education*.

³⁷ Arthur, *Education with Character: The Moral Economy of Schooling*, 2003.

³⁸ Jackson, *Signposts-Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious World Views in Intercultural Education*; Gearon, *MasterClass in Religious Education: Transforming Teaching and Learning*.

³⁹ Haynes, "Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools."

⁴⁰ Halstead and Taylor, "Learning and Teaching about Values: A Review of Recent Research."

Africa's religions and cultures while encouraging moral introspection, communication, and understanding. The idea that religious education plays a significant role in helping students with moral and behavioral issues was one of the main conclusions. Participants saw schools as places where social duties, values, and attitudes are formed in addition to being places where academic knowledge is transmitted. This result is consistent with more general discussions about the goal of education, especially the claim that education entails the development of the whole person rather than just the acquisition of academic skills. Participants' focus on character development aligns with research that emphasizes the role values education plays in moral thinking and ethical decision-making.⁴¹ However, the findings should be interpreted carefully, as the study examined participants' perceptions of RE's potential contribution rather than providing evidence of measurable behavioural change among learners.

The findings further reveal that participants perceive a gap between informal religious practices within communities and the absence of structured Religious Education within schools. Although learners may encounter religious teachings. The results also show that participants believe there is a disconnect between unstructured religious education in schools and informal religious practices in communities. Participants stated that schools now lack a structured setting in which students can critically engage with issues of morality, identity, diversity, and social responsibility, even if students may come across religious beliefs and practices in homes and communities. This distinction is important because it presents religious education as an educational process that helps students understand many worldviews and interact positively with differences, rather than only as the transmission of religious beliefs.

Another significant discovery was inclusion. The participants repeatedly emphasised that religious education should not favour one religious tradition over another and should be in accordance with the Constitution. This reflects the educational environment in South Africa, where religious variety necessitates methods that uphold equality and respect for many systems of belief and non-belief. Jackson argues that religious education in pluralistic countries should promote learning about and from other religious traditions rather than religious adherence, which is consistent with the preference for a multi-faith and dialogical approach.⁴² Based on the results, stakeholders can choose a new strategy that promotes social cohesion and democratic citizenship rather than the reinstatement of previous models of religious education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study and supported by relevant scholarship, the following recommendations are proposed:

Reintroduction of Structured, Inclusive Religious Education

The study recommends the reintroduction of a structured Religious Education (RE) programme in Dzwerani primary schools. The programme should not focus on a single religion. It should be inclusive, multi-faith, and a dialogical model consistent with contemporary scholarship on intercultural education. The Religious Education implemented in schools should not only favour one religion or focus only on the study of religion, but it should also explore non-religious worldviews. This will allow for a more mutual understanding, religious literacy, and social cohesion while respecting constitutional principles of religious freedom.

Integration of Moral and Character Education

The majority of participants emphasised moral development. Therefore, the study recommends integrating Religious Education within broader character education initiatives. Therefore, the curriculum should carefully consider the ages of learners. They should incorporate age-appropriate discussions on values such as honesty, respect, responsibility, and justice. These engagements should not only focus on rule-based compliance.

⁴¹ Arthur, *Education with Character: The Moral Economy of Schooling*, 2003.

⁴² Jackson, *Signposts-Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious World Views in Intercultural Education*.

Professional Development for Educators

Educators of Religious Education should be properly trained. This will allow for an effective implementation of inclusive education. Educators should be taught and trained on classroom facilitation skills, multi-faith literacy and dialogical pedagogy. This education should be well structured and critically reflective rather than merely being prescriptive or doctrine-based. Therefore, there should be training for educators that is aimed at requiring them to manage sensitive discussions, promote openness and respectful discussions and also create environments for diverse perspectives.

Alignment with Constitutional and Policy Frameworks

When Religious Education is being reinstated, it should strictly align with the constitutional principles of equality, dignity, and freedom of religion. Therefore, it should not contradict the South African Constitution. Schools should be clear about the differences between academic Religious Education and personal religious education, avoid coercion and ensure inclusivity.

Addressing Behavioural Challenges through Ethical Dialogue

One of the major concerns that participants raised was behavioural issues, including bullying. Therefore, the study recommends the integration of ethical dialogue and conflict-resolution strategies into the Religious Education curriculum. Scholars have proven that structured engagement with moral dilemmas enhances empathy and reduces antisocial behaviour. In rural contexts where counselling resources are limited, Religious Education may serve as a complementary platform for addressing moral and social challenges through reflective discussion and value-based learning.

CONCLUSION

This study examined different perspectives on the relevance of Religious Education in primary schools in Dzwerani. The findings of this study suggest and support the reintroduction of a structured Religious Education in primary schools to encourage moral development, ethical decision-making, social cohesion, and inclusivity. All participants suggested the reinstatement of Religious Education that prioritises discussions. The participants further stated that this will improve respect and conflict resolution among pupils. The perspectives of the participants correspond to existing scholarly work that presents Religious Education as an essential factor in character formation and intercultural understanding. The absence of religious education in primary schools around Dzwerani reveals a gap between informal religious practice and formal ethical education. This study is not advocating for a specific religion; however, it supports an inclusive, dialogical, and constitutionally aligned model of Religious Education that exposes learners to diverse religious and non-religious worldviews. In a country where equality is prioritised, such an approach improves democratic citizenship, tolerance, and respect for diversity in pluralistic societies. If Religious Education is taught with pedagogical integrity and inclusivity, it can potentially contribute meaningfully to the holistic development of learners in primary schools. Future research may focus on curriculum design models suitable for rural contexts and explore the long-term impact of inclusive Religious Education on learner behaviour and social cohesion.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aderibigbe, Semiyu Adejare, Mesut Idriz, Khadeegha Alzouebi, Hussain AlOthman, Wafa Barhoumi Hamdi, and Assad Asil Companioni. "Fostering Tolerance and Respect for Diversity through the Fundamentals of Islamic Education." *Religions* 14, no. 2 (February 3, 2023): 212.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020212>.
- Arthur, J. "Education with Character: The Moral Economy of Schooling." *Routledge Falmer Google Scholar* 2 (2003): 3–20.
- Arthur, James. *Education with Character: The Moral Economy of Schooling*. Psychology Press, 2003.

- Audi, Robert. "Religion and Democracy: Interactions, Tensions, Possibilities." *Daedalus* 149, no. 3 (2020): 5–24.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners," 2013.
- . "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.
- Chidester, David. *Religion: Material Dynamics*. California: Univ of California Press, 2018.
- Cohen, L., L. Manion, and K. Morrison. "Research Methods in Education. 8th Edn Routledge," 2018.
- Coller, Helena van. "Religious Freedom in South Africa." In *Religious Freedom in Secular States*, 217–33. Brill | Nijhoff, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004449961_011.
- Creswell, J. W., and C. N. Poth. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. 4th ed. Sage, 2018.
- Damons, E. O. "Religious Education in South African Public Schools." Doctoral dissertation, 2016.
- Denzin, N. K., and Y. S. Lincoln. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 5th ed. Sage, 2018.
- Department of Education. "National Policy on Religion and Education." *Government Gazette* 25495 59 (2003).
- Gearon, Liam. *MasterClass in Religious Education: Transforming Teaching and Learning*. A&C Black, 2013.
- Halstead, J. Mark, and Monica J. Taylor. "Learning and Teaching about Values: A Review of Recent Research." *Cambridge Journal of Education* 30, no. 2 (June 2000): 169–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713657146>.
- Haynes, C. C. "Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools." First Amendment Center, 2002.
- Hofmeyr, Jane Mary. *An Examination of the Influence of Christian National Education on the Principles Underlying White and Black Education in South Africa: 1948-1982*. University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (South Africa), 1982.
- Holt, James. *Religious Education in the Secondary School: An Introduction to Teaching, Learning and the World Religions*. Taylor & Francis, 2022.
- Jackson, Robert. *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious Worldviews in Intercultural Education*. Council of Europe, 2014.
- Kohlberg, Lawrence. *Essays on Moral Development/1 The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice*. Harper & Row, 1981.
- . "The Philosophy of Moral Development Vol. 1," 1981.
- Komariah, Nurul, and Ishmatun Nihayah. "Improving the Personality Character of Students through Learning Islamic Religious Education." *At-Tadzkir: Islamic Education Journal* 2, no. 1 (2023): 65–77.
- Kumar, P. Pratap. "Religious Pluralism and Religious Education in South Africa." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 18, no. 3 (2006): 273–93.
- Lee, John Chi-Kin. "Curriculum Paradigms and Perspectives of Life and Spiritual Education: Contrast and Diversity." *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*. Taylor & Francis, 2020.
- McDonald, Zahraa. "The Classroom, an Inadequate Mechanism for Advancing Diversity via Religion Education in the South African Context." *Journal for the Study of Religion* 28, no. 2 (2015): 202–19.
- MEC for Education: KwaZulu-Natal and Others v Pillay (CCT 51/06) [2007] ZACC 21; 2007 (3) BCLR 287 (CC); 2007 (2) SA 106 (CC).
- Merriam, Sharan B., and Elizabeth J. Tisdell. *Qualitative Research*. 4th ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016.
- Nowell, Lorelli S., Jill M. Norris, Deborah E. White, and Nancy J. Moules. "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): 1609406917733847.
- Nucci, L., and D. Narvaez. *Handbook of Moral and Character Education*. Routledge, 2008.

- Palinkas, Lawrence A., Sarah M. Horwitz, Carla A. Green, Jennifer P. Wisdom, Naihua Duan, and Kimberly Hoagwood. "Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research." *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42, no. 5 (September 6, 2015): 533–44. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>.
- Republic of South Africa. "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa." *Government Gazette* 378, no. 17678 (1996).
- Serfontein, C. "Cost Efficiency versus Disruption: Are Traditional Universities Doomed?" *South African Journal of Higher Education* 39, no. 1 (2025): 315–37.
- Tikly, L. P. "Education Policy in South Africa since 1948 ." University of Glasgow, 1994.
- Walt, J. L. van der. "Religion in Education: Is There Yet Another Solution?" *Koers: Bulletin for Christian Scholarship= Koers: Bulletin Vir Christelike Wetenskap* 75, no. 1 (2010): 79–98.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Avheani Carol Sambula is a Master of Arts in Theology student at the University of Venda.

Hundzukani Portia Khosa holds a PhD from the University of Pretoria. She is an associate Professor at North-West University in the school of Christian Ministry and leadership. Prior to joining North-West University, she was a senior lecturer in the Department of Human Sciences at the University of Venda.

Prof. Takalani Samuel Mashau is the Deputy Dean of Research and Postgraduate Studies in the Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education at the University of Venda in South Africa. He is a Professor of Comparative Education.