



# Teacher Professional Learning in Religious and Moral Education: Conditions Affecting its Effectiveness at St. Ambrose College of Education in Ghana

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## ABSTRACT

Like specialized teachers in any field of education, teachers of Religious and Moral Education (RME) require exclusive quality skills, expertise and strategies to provide effective delivery of lessons in the field. At St. Ambrose College of Education in the Dormaa East District in the Bono Region of Ghana, Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) is given greater attention. Nonetheless, TPL has been insufficient for improving teaching and learning in RME as expected. The study attempted to investigate the insufficiency of the TPL model for instructional delivery in RME and seeks to offer suitable suggestions and recommendations. Data for the study was collected from the four (4) RME teachers in the college using interviews and the researchers' observations. The results indicated that some conditions in St. Ambrose College of Education are responsible for the insufficient TPL outcomes in RME. These include a lack of innovative teaching approaches exclusive to the field, the college leadership's belief in the use of a confessional approach in teaching RME, the inadequacy of instructional time in the field, and the communication gap between teachers. To address these, it was suggested that enactment strategies used by RME teachers should be content-focused, based on active learning, collaboration, modeling, and coaching by experts. The study adds to the literature on the course structure in the course structure of Ghanaian Educational system.

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## INTRODUCTION

In today's rapid-paced changing times, educators everywhere keep looking earnestly for effective teaching approaches for producing learners endowed with 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies. This is believed to be the solution for addressing the numerous social, political and religious challenges facing humankind and societies in modern times.<sup>1</sup> Teachers' professional knowledge and expertise will

<sup>1</sup> Y. Cho, "Innovations in Training New Teachers: The Development of Korean Education through a New System for Colleges of Education," *South Korean Submission to the Alliance, College of Education, Seoul National University*, 2008.

amount to nothing if it does not reflect in the output of their students. Thus, ignoring ways and procedures that improve teachers' competencies and learners' standards in academic performance is unacceptable.

In Ghana, previous governments have used various reformative measures to restructure the school curriculum since the country achieved independence. The intention has always been to promote quality education in the country through strategic and innovative approaches. The outcomes of such initiatives hinge on teacher preparedness for capacity development, the standard of learners' output and the efficiency of teaching technologies being introduced.<sup>2</sup> In view of this, the expected change can occur when there are structures in teacher education to drive the national education policies to the expected end.<sup>3</sup>

In 2016, the government of Ghana and UK-Aid initiated a project called Transforming Teacher Education and Learning (T-TEL) in colleges of education and the purpose of this project was to provide comprehensive capacity-building training known as TPL for all teachers in colleges of education. This approach helps to improve teachers' skills and competencies in teaching, especially teacher preparation.<sup>4</sup> It enables teachers to achieve the overall school improvement goals in teacher education. This modern professional learning approach in educational research has proven to be so beneficial and useful for countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Hong Kong, Finland and Singapore.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore not surprising that high-priority attention is being allotted to the implementation of the TPL innovation in the current Ghanaian educational system.

However, in spite of the numerous benefits associated with the implementation of the TPL approach in teacher education, it seems that its effectiveness has not been felt so well in the field of RME. Some conditions tend to threaten its effectiveness in teaching the subject at St. Ambrose College of Education in Ghana. Instead of being a promising initiative, the TPL innovation seems to be insufficient to provide effective instructional delivery to attain intended learning outcomes in RME. Using it to merge the constructivist view of knowledge construction with the sacred texts, beliefs and moral standards of the three major religions in the field seems to be making little progress in the field.

This matter portrays a complex layer of academic confusion to RME teachers in the St. Ambrose College of Education. Meanwhile, the University of Cape Coast, the mentoring university for the College and T-TEL are doing all they can to enhance effective TPL use in the field. Studies that have been done about this issue, over the past few years, have completely focused on matters in public secular schools than faith-based schools.<sup>6</sup> This has created a gap that requires a comprehensive enquiry. There is therefore the need to investigate why RME is not making steady progress with the use of TPL in the college. Thus, this study seeks to:

- Investigate conditions in the faith-based colleges of education that threaten the success of TPL in the RME subject area.
- Examine the effects of insufficient TPL practices for the delivery of RME lessons in St. Ambrose College of Education.
- Discover measures that address challenges affecting the effective implementation of TPL in RME.

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Archibald, "Narrowing in on Educational Resources That Do Affect Student Achievement," *Peabody Journal of Education* 81, no. 4 (2006): 23–42; Linda Darling-Hammond, "Constructing 21st-Century Teacher Education," *Journal of Teacher Education* 57, no. 3 (2006): 300–314.

<sup>3</sup> Isaac Buabeng, Forster Danso Ntow, and Charles Deodat Otami, "Teacher Education in Ghana: Policies and Practices.," *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching* 9, no. 1 (2020): 86–95.

<sup>4</sup> Michael S Garet et al., "What Makes Professional Development Effective? Results from a National Sample of Teachers," *American Educational Research Journal* 38, no. 4 (2001): 915–45.

<sup>5</sup> World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report 2014-2015.

<sup>6</sup> Michael W Firmin and Krista Merrick Gilson, "Mission Statement Analysis of CCCU Member Institutions," *Christian Higher Education* 9, no. 1 (2009): 60–70; Stephen G Parker, Rob Freathy, and Jonathan Doney, "The Professionalisation of Non-Denominational Religious Education in England: Politics, Organisation and Knowledge," *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 37, no. 2 (2016): 201–38.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

TPL is one of the efficient pedagogical strategies enabling teachers, Tutors in the Colleges of Education, to promote quality education in all fields.

According to Darling-Hammond, it enables them to use effective and practical modalities to improve their practice and to keep up with new developments that maintain their enthusiasm in knowledge application in a subject area.<sup>7</sup> Thus, TPL is an essential methodological tool that improves the knowledge, skills and instructional practices of tutors. For Avalos, TPL provides a mechanism for tutors to learn how to transform knowledge into practice to promote the intellectual growth of students.<sup>8</sup> Scholars such as Darling-Hammond believe that traditional approaches in teaching such as lectures, dictation and story-telling lack sufficiency because they tend to be fragmented and disconnected from the actual needs of students.<sup>9</sup> These are seen as intellectually superficial teaching approaches, not equipping students with relevant knowledge and skills to meet the expected outcomes with precision. It is as a result of this that TPL gains general acceptability in most educational institutions and environments in the world.

Through the use of TPL, RME tutors can demonstrate knowledge and skills that help to make connections between the strands of the curriculum and the practical life experience of students. It is a necessary tool to help RME tutors to deliver in a manner which will encourage students to actively construct their own knowledge.<sup>10</sup> The purpose is to ensure that students do not fall victim to academic indoctrination since TPL conforms to the constructivist view of knowledge construction. It helps RME students to merge instructions with the unchallengeable sacred texts and beliefs of the celebrated religions to produce practical knowledge to guide moral choice and practice.

In their study to investigate the professional skills of RME teacher trainees, Everington, ter Avest, Bakker, and van der Want found that the personal learning and development of the trainees shaped their professional practice in the discipline.<sup>11</sup> Recent research also found that the participation of religious education teachers in TPL enabled them to share their beliefs and ideas with conviction.<sup>12</sup>

Because one of the major goals of education is to promote student learning, the use of the TPL approach must be seen as a very essential component of teacher education.<sup>13</sup> It is argued that the most exciting way by which teacher trainees can make sense of their acquired professional knowledge is through the use of socially mediated strategies acquired through teachers' professional practice. In view of this, Darling-Hammond believes that teacher training institutions should institute programmes that promote a practical understanding of trainee teachers, concerning teaching and learning. Hence the need for TPL in the teaching of RME.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond, "Teacher Education and the American Future," *Journal of Teacher Education* 61, no. 1–2 (2010): 35–47.

<sup>8</sup> Beatrice Avalos, "Teacher Professional Development in Teaching and Teacher Education over Ten Years," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 27, no. 1 (2011): 10–20.

<sup>9</sup> Darling-Hammond, "Teacher Education and the American Future"; Darling-Hammond, "Constructing 21st-Century Teacher Education."

<sup>10</sup> Terence Copley, "Non-Indoctrinatory Religious Education in Secular Cultures," *Religious Education* 103, no. 1 (2008): 22–31.

<sup>11</sup> Judith Everington et al., "European Religious Education Teachers' Perceptions of and Responses to Classroom Diversity and Their Relationship to Personal and Professional Biographies," *British Journal of Religious Education* 33, no. 2 (March 2011): 241–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2011.546669>.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Everington, "Being Professional": RE Teachers' Understandings of Professionalism 1997–2014," *British Journal of Religious Education* 38, no. 2 (May 3, 2016): 177–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2016.1139892>; Rob Freathy and Helen C. John, "Religious Education, Big Ideas and the Study of Religion(s) and Worldview(S)," *British Journal of Religious Education*, July 31, 2018, 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2018.1500351>.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond and John Bransford, *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World: What Teachers Should Learn and Be Able to Do* (John Wiley & Sons, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Darling-Hammond, "Constructing 21st-Century Teacher Education."

## METHODOLOGY

St. Ambrose College of Education was used as a case study in this study to examine the effectiveness of TPL in the delivery of the RME curriculum. Being a qualitative study, the case study design was appropriate since it helped to discover the extent to which the suspected conditions in the said College were affecting the effectiveness of learning outcomes in RME. The approach helped to analyse the suspected conditions in the College that were posing threats to the teaching and learning of RME using the TPL techniques. Using the case study design provided ample time to obtain the required data and analyse the situation in the college as it is found. Four teachers who teach RME at St. Ambrose College of Education were used as respondents in the study. Their selection was based on the purposive sampling technique. Both researchers' observation and the use of a semi-structured interview guide were used to obtain the expected information about the phenomenon. The researchers' observations and the views of the respondents were collected after following approved protocols in the college. The observation of the researchers and the interview items focused on conditions in St. Ambrose College of Education that appeared threatening to the success of TPL in RME, the effects of the purported conditions on the effectiveness of TPL for RME enactment and measures to be used in addressing the issue in this faith-based college. In short, the whole focus was to interrogate the insufficiency of TPL in fostering effective attainment of RME learning outcomes at St. Ambrose College of Education.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The researchers' observations and information gathered from the respondents were analyzed and discussed in a bid to address the issue under study. Though the findings were presented and discussed in a narrative form, analysis of the data was done using frequency tables and percentages, based on study variables related to the research questions of the study.

### Background Information of the Respondents

Table 1. *Gender of respondents*

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	3	75%
Female	1	25%
Total	4	100%

Source (Field data, 2022)

Table 1 shows that out of the four RME Teachers (RMET) in St. Ambrose College of Education, three (3) of them representing 75% are males while one representing 25% is female. This means that the majority of RME teachers in the above college are males. That notwithstanding, the data were collected from both sexes to ensure inclusivity and gender responsiveness.

Table 1. Observation of the Number of Years used to teach Religious and Moral Education in the College

Programme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
RMET A	8	47.1%
RMET B	4	23.5%
RMET C	4	23.5%
RMET D	1	5.9%
Total	17	100

Source (Field data, 2022)

The researchers took considerable time to observe the work experiences and number of years each of the four teachers has spent teaching RME in the college. The researchers' observation indicated that three of the respondents, representing 75% of the population, were very experienced and had worked

in the college between four (4) to eight (8) years. The remaining respondent, representing 25%, was found to be a new teacher in both the field and the college and had served for just one year. The interview conducted confirmed the researchers’ observation and indicated that the respondents have been in St. Ambrose College of Education with different time durations. Table 2 shows four RMETs and different year durations they have taught in the college. It can be seen that RMET A is the longest serving teacher in the college with 8 years representing 47.1% of the comparative duration with the other respondents. Moreover, RMET B and RMET C hinted that they all came to the college in the same year and so each of them has spent 4 years, representing 23.5% duration as compared with their other colleague teachers. RMET D was found to have spent only one-year time duration representing 5.9% as compared with the rest. This means that RME teachers (RMETs) in the college have had an average professional experience in the field. The TPL will thus help to improve the teaching skills of these teachers very well.

Table 3: Interview Responses to Conditions threatening organization of TPL in RME in St. Ambrose College of Education

Control Elements	RMET A	RMET B	RMET C	RMET D	Response (%)
Limited innovative skills	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	4 (100)
Institutional leadership	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	4 (100)
Time inadequacy	No	Yes	Yes	No	2 (50)
Communication gap	No	No	No	Yes	1 (25)

Source (Field data, 2022)

Concerning conditions in the faith-based college of education suspected to be lowering progress in achieving TPL outcomes in RME, the four respondents identified a lack of innovative teaching approaches in the field as one such condition. They emphasized that the modern practice of teaching RME requires the availability of specialist teachings and learning resources such as religious and moral laboratories, customized videos, projectors and artefacts that can adequately promote the principles of TPL in RME. Insufficiency of such opportunities restricts the teachers to resort to the old traditional methods which do not stimulate effective attainment of expected outcomes in the field. Table 3 clearly shows that inadequate use of innovative instructional skills is a major challenge to the implementation of the TPL approach in RME. The respondents, therefore, claimed the existing circumstance is not pro-TPL. Thus, Margolis, Durbin, and Doring are right in saying that poor instructional conditions portray a complex layer of academic confusion to teachers and learners of religion.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the respondents admitted that the priestly leadership of faith-based colleges, including the college in which the study was conducted, poses a threat to academic progress in RME. The reason offered for this revelation is that religious personalities have different views concerning approaches to the instructional delivery of the content of RME. They endorse the use of confessional approaches in teaching religion which results in limited students’ scope rather than the non-confessional approaches which make them objective analysts. This implicit expectation of the college leadership concerning the delivery of lessons was noted to be affecting the proper clasp of the TPL ideals and experiential pedagogies of RME teachers are expected to use.

The next condition touched on by the respondents was the insufficiency of instructional time on the side of RME teachers using the TPL techniques. When asked why the TPL principles don’t seem to be explicitly applied in the teaching and learning of RME, 2 respondents (50%) attributed it to insufficient time. They claimed that the nature of the content of RME requires a bit more time to achieve the expected outcomes of TPL. The innovation is believed to consume a lot of time and so the duration allocated to the subject on the timetable is seen as not adequate to meet TPL expectations.

<sup>15</sup> Jason Margolis, Rebecca Durbin, and Anne Doring, “The Missing Link in Teacher Professional Development: Student Presence,” *Professional Development in Education* 43, no. 1 (2017): 23–35.

Interestingly, two respondents (50%) opposed this view for the reason that in every subject area, the same amount of time is consumed by teachers but there is considerable improvement in attaining the TPL outcomes there compared with RME. They even mentioned subject areas like Mathematics and Science as areas where TPL is working faster and so rejected insufficiency of time in the delivery of RME as part of the conditions.

Finally, it can be seen from the table that only one respondent, representing 25%, opined that the communication gap between teachers in the field affects the potency of TPL in the lesson delivery of RME. The remaining respondents (75%) were, however, of the view that lack of good communication between the subject teachers cannot be inimical to TPL effectiveness in RME. Thus, the respondents generally believe that the progress being made with the implementation of TPL in RME leaves a lot to be desired due to some conditions but poor communication between RME teachers cannot be used as a threatening and harmful condition.

### **EFFECTS OF INSUFFICIENT TPL IN THE DELIVERY OF RME LESSONS**

It was revealed through the interview with the respondents that the insufficient influence of TPL on the teaching and learning of RME is having a negative effect on the prospects of the course in St. Ambrose College of Education. Their views are presented as follows:

#### **a. Unhealthy Psychological wellbeing**

All the interviewees indicated that insufficient impact of TPL in RME negatively affects the psychological wellbeing of the teachers. It makes them feel that their efforts are not being rewarded. They claimed that insufficient outcome of TPL practices in their subject area tends to weaken their motivation and feelings towards teaching. The same teachers revealed that the issue can demotivate students as well. They claim that “Students who are not internally motivated to learn RME may see a decline in their academic progression.”

#### **b. A Shift of Instructional Focus**

All the respondents mentioned that the issue of insufficient TPL in the RME subject area makes them apprehensive sometimes due to the incongruence between their efforts and outcomes of learning. They asserted that the shift of instructional focus from traditional methods to new models and principles of teaching has affected their input and its corresponding output. They were, however, optimistic that the approach will work soon for them and that the expected outcomes will be met. They appealed to the leadership of the faith-based college to eliminate conditions that would not make TPL for RME. One teacher said, “Teaching RME in the midst of such a school climate retards progress in learning.”

#### **c. Feelings of Anxiety**

Another thing partly revealed by the respondents was that the insufficiency of TPL effectively informing the outcomes of instructional delivery in RME is giving them a sense of feeling of anxiety. Though two respondents were silent on this, two were of the opinion that insufficient evidence of TPL in the output of RME students creates anxiety for them and sometimes symptoms of muscular cramps, energy deficit, neck tension, and upset stomach. They asserted that such stress-related conditions can harm their physical well-being.

### **Measures to Address Conditions Affecting Effective Implementation of TPL in RME**

The findings of the research brought to bear the following measures to address conditions affecting the effective implementation of TPL in RME.

#### **a. Content Focused**

All the respondents indicated that the organization of TPL in RME should focus on addressing specific curriculum contexts in the subject area rather than the general scope of the field. This, to them, deepens the specific knowledge or skills of teachers in the field concerning techniques and

strategies proffered by TPL to address the needs of students in productive ways. The significance of this idea is to help RME teachers to sequence instructional delivery in a manner that would help students to construct coherent and progressive knowledge that makes sense to them.

**b. Active Learning**

The interviewees identified active learning techniques in RME as one of the ways through which evidence of TPL can manifest in the outcomes of teaching and learning of RME. The respondents maintained that active learning provides RME teachers with opportunities to get hands-on experiences and competencies in teaching just like teachers in the sciences. Using the real contextual curriculum illustration and grade level instruction, as they indicated, helps teachers in the field to immerse themselves in the types of learning activities they have created for their students. This was noted to be laudable because working together with students helps to identify potential professional challenges affecting their delivery. In view of this, the respondents were optimistic that active engagement in teaching and learning with one's students produce profitable outcomes. Reflections on displayed abilities, methods used and content control were all mentioned as techniques that would improve the TPL situation in RME at St. Ambrose College of Education.

**c. Collaboration**

Another approach that was mentioned by the respondents to be effective to address TPL challenges in RME is teacher collaborative practices. Though there has been a collaboration among teachers in the field during TPL sessions, they saw healthy collaboration for instructional delivery as an avenue for teachers to share ideas in planning, professional preparation for teaching, and instructional strategies in the classroom. By working collaboratively with other teachers in the field or even those in other fields, it was mentioned that it creates a healthy school community that can positively change the status quo of teaching in the field. Through this initiative, teachers engage in real reflections on the learning of their students and participate as learners in the activities they want to implement for their students.

**d. Use of Models and Modeling**

With the exception of one respondent who was not sure of the relevance of using modeling for the enactment of RME lessons in faith-based colleges, the remaining three indicated that curricular models would provide them with real practical lessons of teaching which can solve the problem. To them, teachers can view models of teaching strategies spelt out by TPL in the form of planning, effective teaching, classroom management, and contextual assessment. Curricular models are therefore noted to be used in multiple ways to promote teacher learning.

**e. Coaching and Expert Support**

Mentoring and expert support were pointed out by all the respondents as one of the measures that could be used to promote the effective delivery of RME in faith-based colleges of education. This procedure involves the provision of expert knowledge concerning content and practices to teachers in the field to focus directly on the needs of the discipline. They maintained that the sharing of experts' specialized professional skills with teachers on a one-on-one coaching basis in the classroom is the best solution. They could present themselves as facilitators of workshops or remote mentors using appropriate pedagogy and technology. Such experts, they noted, could be subject teachers from universities and other colleges.

**f. Feedback and Reflection**

The last thing that the respondents touched on as a solution to the TPL deficit in the outcomes of RME in St. Ambrose College of Education is high-class professional learning. They said this provides teachers with the ability to contribute and make changes to the existing practice through reflection and feedback. They further asserted that feedback and reflection are necessary during

the planning of lessons, demonstration of lessons, and evaluation of learning. These activities could frequently be undertaken in the subject area to monitor progress being made.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Educational Policies create firm support and incentives for professional learning practices in educational institutions. This helps to guide the proposal, evaluation and funding of professional learning practices in institutions such as colleges of education, especially the faith-based ones. Policymakers could look at school schedules and the use of time to increase opportunities for teacher collaborations and professional learning practices, including participation in peer coaching workshops and general observations across classrooms. College principals and leaders of mentoring universities could conduct needs assessments regularly, using data from staff surveys to detect areas where professional learning is required. Data from such sources may ensure that professional learning is connected with practice or supports the areas of knowledge and skills required by teachers.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study recommends that similar studies be repeated in other faith-based colleges to check whether similar results will emerge and be addressed. Teachers of RME in faith-based colleges should be encouraged to engage in healthy talks with their school authorities to correct certain conditions that negatively affect TPL practices in RME. This would help them to achieve successful lesson outcomes in the field.

### **CONCLUSION**

Ghana is a religiously pluralistic society and needs qualified and competent tutors to handle the Religious and Moral Education (RME) curriculum in teacher education. The 21st century has seen a paradigm shift in the purpose and delivery of Religious and Moral Education and so professional knowledge and skills are needed in the teaching of RME. This will help to promote the intellectual, psychological, moral, emotional and spiritual development of RME students. It is one of the reasons why the Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) model was introduced in colleges of education.

Through the TPL approach, professional teaching strategies are mastered by tutors, including RME tutors, to establish a connection between the theory of teaching and practice. With this, RME tutors are able to demonstrate adequate knowledge and understanding of strategies used to prepare qualified teachers to handle the curriculum of the subject in basic schools. However, some conditions affect the effective use of the TPL pedagogy in the teaching and learning of RME at St. Ambrose College of Education. Sufficient teaching and learning resources such as religious laboratories, customized videos, projectors and artefacts need to be used by RME tutors in line with the principles of teaching. Moreover, RME tutors need to employ models and modelling, active learning, coaching and expert support, collaboration, feedback and reflective strategies to address the research questions of the study.

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