




From Which to Why Not Religions in the Curriculum. A Troubled Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

The theoretical paper tapped into Bernstein’s notion of weak framing to point out the ambivalence of the religious curriculum in Zimbabwe. It showed the curriculum terrain that Religious Education has undergone and predicted its future. It also showed how curriculum conversations have moved the “which religions” question to why not religions in the curriculum. The paper argued that the weak framing of the religious curriculum presents itself as a playing field for politicians, curriculum planners, and educators where its validity is not to benefit the learners but to push the propaganda of the ZANU PF regime. The paper concludes, arguing that the presence of the religious curriculum has always been to buttress the status quo of the oppressor and the oppressed. Rejuvenation of the field is necessary, and urgent so that learners are not deprived of the benefits associated with the RE curriculum.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious Education (RE) (although it has various names such as Religious Studies, Family and Moral Education, Bible Knowledge, etc) has been a very contentious subject in both pre and post-independence Zimbabwe. Its trajectories have ranged from being a subject connected with evangelization, being too easy, lack of trained teachers and perceived lack of relevance in the corporate world other than a religious office. To this end, RE as a subject has travelled a contested terrain with various debates such as whose religion should be in the curriculum and why RE should not premise curriculum discourse in post-colonial Zimbabwe. The contestation around the subject in relation to curriculum conversation is best premised on Bernstein's view of powerful knowledge and the knowledge of the powerful. Furthermore, the contestation of RE can be best summed up as a political tool of the day, which has always sought to advance the political agenda of the day.

Hence, as the paper develops, it concurs with the observation of Bernstein that “how a society selects, clarifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principle of social control”.¹ The essence of Bernstein's statement is that the knowledge presented in the curriculum has not always been neutral. It is value-laden and positioned to reveal the power dynamics both in society and in the educational context. In terms of societal context, RE has been poised as a critical subject for civic education and social cohesion, which often benefits the capitalistic society, and its longevity is invoiced to the poor in any society. In the education context, it also assumes an accommodation role of various contested

¹ B. Bernstein, *Coding and Framing in Education* (London: Routledge, 1970), 47.

religious ideologies that have engulfed citizens, which in turn feeds into sustaining oppressive regimes based on welcoming different faiths into the curriculum. Informed by the foregoing, the paper supports the observation by Gearon that religious education has become increasingly enmeshed with influential political agencies across a wide spectrum of geopolitical contexts.² Such close and integral involvement with such political agencies will inevitably change the subject and mould its interests to those political forces.

This paper and in relation to curriculum change, considers two questions that have informed discourse in the field of RE in Zimbabwe and these questions are; Which religions should contextualise religious curriculum? Why should religious education not be in the curriculum? The latter question is rather the researcher's projection in terms of what could lead to RE's exclusion from the Zimbabwean curriculum. Although as a religious and curriculum scholar, one would always prefer the presence of the RE in the curriculum, as would be discussed, several issues need to be addressed to ensure RE relevance. In the following section, the paper discusses the theorization premised on Bernstein's notion of framing.

THEORISATION: Bernstein's Notion of Framing

In outlining the theory of the study, the researcher admits that Bernstein's theory is very comprehensive in addressing curriculum issues from a sociological space. Bernstein has coined a "sociological theory on pedagogy which can be used to describe the complexity of the role and function of schools in society, especially the complex system of symbolic codes that are used to control schools."³ In a holistic approach, Bernstein's theory "offers an advanced perspective on pedagogical relations and practices including issues related to power, change and knowledge that transcend dualistic divisions such as "traditional" and "entrepreneurial", which are not analytically helpful.⁴ Cognisant of the foregoing, the study does not seek to comprehensively discuss Bernstein's notions of the curriculum, however, it limits thinking to Bernstein's notion of framing. In terms of the definition of framing, Chein and Wallance define it as a "method by which the realization of power arrangements is transmitted."⁵ Framing includes the regulative discourse, which is responsible for providing the acquirer with the necessary skills to manoeuvre around the space of the classroom and the school, and the instructional discourse." For framing to effectively work, it must be accompanied by a degree of power. This power, as argued by Diehl, et.al., "is the ability to create, legitimize and reproduce such boundaries. Power is also used to establish changes in a given direction, it acts between different groups or categories to control and create a legitimate educational practice".⁶ According to Bernstein, the power within the continuum of framing either makes framing strong or weak. For an easier understanding of weak framing, it is critical to define strong framing which implies "that students have limited control over the 'relations within' and a limited degree of control over the sequencing, pacing, selection and evaluation of the knowledge transmitted."⁷ Then, the weak framing is the opposite of the strong where control is liquid, where teachers, students and stakeholders have a great deal of control, manipulation and interpretations.

This paper sees RE as a subject suffering from weak framing. Thus, as the argument develops, weak framing would be referred to as a serious challenge that affects RE rather than providing opportunities for child development. It disagrees with the notion that a "weak framing encourages expressive, interactive, interpersonal, creative, differentiated, and pupil-generated forms of social

² Liam Gearon, "European Religious Education and European Civil Religion," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 60, no. 2 (2012): 154.

³ Thurídur Jóhannsdóttir, "How to Configure Classification and Framing in Distance Teaching," in *European Conference on Educational Research*, 2008, 1.

⁴ Monika Dieh, Joakim Lindgren, and Eva Leffler, "The Impact of Classification and Framing in Entrepreneurial Education: Field Observations in Two Lower Secondary Schools," *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 3, no. 8 (August 2015): 490, <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2015.030803>.

⁵ Robyn Chien and John Wallace, "The Use of Bernstein's Framework in Mapping School Culture and the Resultant Development of the Curriculum," in *AARE International Education Research Conference, Melbourne, Australia*, 2004, 4.

⁶ Dieh, Lindgren, and Leffler, "The Impact of Classification and Framing in Entrepreneurial Education: Field Observations in Two Lower Secondary Schools," 489.

⁷ Ursula Hoadley, "Analysing Pedagogy: The Problem of Framing," *Journal of Education* 40, no. 1 (2006): 15–34.

control and organization.”⁸ Weak framing makes the curriculum boundaries of any subject flexible which exposes the subject to various interpretations, misconceptions and capture especially by the political elites of the day. The fact that interpretations remain open to various meanings makes it easy for politicians to capture the subject to enact an ideology that suits their ideology through the curriculum. It is this weak framing as applied to RE that opens the subject to various people, such as church members, politicians, and untrained teachers rendering the subject a target for misuse.

The move towards inclusivity in Religious Education in Zimbabwe

This section responds to question one of this paper.

Monolistic Religious Curriculum

It is critical to set the background to question one. Zimbabwe in 1980 emerged as a post-colonial state that was greatly influenced by the Christian religion. There are various reasons for this such as the influence of the missionaries on education, funding of the education from the former colonizers, being part of the Commonwealth, and evangelization which had engraved the Zimbabwean population among many other things. In order to remain true to the Christian faith, it was indispensable to maintain the ideology through the curriculum. Consequently, since 1980 the RE was purely Christocentric in character.⁹ The dominance of the Christian faith was halted in 2017 when the curriculum moved toward the accommodation of African indigenous religions and other western religions. Prior to 2017, the dominance was underpinned by the fact that Zimbabwe has estimates of Christians amounting to 78% (10,000,000) [with Pentecostalism claiming over 30%], African Traditional Religion (ATR) with 18% (2 500,000), Islam with 3% (85 000) and Hinduism (7800) and others taking less than 1%.¹⁰

In addition, the dominance was premised on the observation by Amoah and Bennett who continued the trend that “African religions should be reduced to animism and ancestor worship” while elevating Christianity under the guise of modernity.¹¹ This arrangement as argued by Dube has been to use Christianity as a tool to create docility by the regime.¹² Although this study agrees with Gwaranda, et.al., that a religious curriculum informed by a multifaith approach “is inadequate, misplaced and insensitive to the virtue of religious respect in the globalised world”,¹³ the RE curriculum should not be seen as a mere curriculum but a ZANU PF ideological tool for what this study refers to as soft repression. This means that political players in Zimbabwe have looked at RE as a factor that buttresses repression and maintains the population under the ideology of ZANU PF and the curriculum seemed like an unsuspecting space to sustain the regime through religion. This is worsened by the fallacy that is engraved in most Africans that religion is so divine and cannot be questioned. Thus, everything packaged in religious language should not be questioned as such, this has worked very well for the regime which has always wanted to appear democratic and accommodative, but a deeper analysis indicates thwarted democracy. This is part of the state ideology to remain in power, hence it agrees with the observation by Andrews and Skoczylis that;

“all non-violent state apparatus’ must be saturated with ideology. This is because states that do not try to reproduce themselves ideologically will not last long. They do not just need to reproduce the skills necessary to maintain production; they also need to reproduce the relationships and ideas that sustain the established order. Ideology needs to be reproduced”.¹⁴

⁸ Peter Pausigere, “On Bernstein’s Sociology of Pedagogy and How It Can Inform the Pedagogic Realisation of Poor and Working-Class Children in South African Primary Maths Education,” *Educational Research for Social Change* 5, no. 1 (2016): 45.

⁹ Lovemore Ndlovu, “Religion Education Teaching in Zimbabwe Secondary Schools: The Search for an Authentic Values-Oriented Multi-Faith Religion Education Pedagogical Model,” *British Journal of Religious Education* 36, no. 2 (2014): 174–201.

¹⁰ Zimbabwe Demographic Survey, *Zimbabwe Demographic Survey for 2010- 2011* (Harare: Government Printers, 2012).

¹¹ Jewel Amoah and Tom Bennett, “The Freedoms of Religion and Culture under the South African Constitution: Do Traditional African Religions Enjoy Equal Treatment?,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 24, no. 1 (2008): 8.

¹² B. Dube, “Religious Education as an Ideological Tool in Zimbabwe: Unpacking the Strategy of the Regime,” in *Regime and Education in Zimbabwe. Unpacking Post-Independence Curriculum Crisis*, ed. B Dube and A. Mufanechiya (Lexington Books, 2024).

¹³ E.T. Gwaranda, E Masitera, and P. Muzambi, “Education and Globalization: A Critique of Zimbabwe’s Current Religious Studies Ordinary Level Syllabus,” *Alternation* 10 (2013): 221.

¹⁴ Sam Andrews and Joshua Skoczylis, “Prevent, Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus: Analysing Terrorism Prevention Policies Using Althusser’s Framework,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 50, no. 2 (January 17, 2022): 421, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298211063929>.

Having noted this, ideology is propagated through the curriculum but at the same time it is difficult to ignore the dissenting voices of other religions but any regime that seeks to survive always ensures that the accommodated religions would be by default or design propagated ideology under the disguise of being fair. This is a reward of a curriculum that has a weak framing like RE.

Conversations for A Multi-Religious Society

The Christocentric approach was in essence an attempt to reduce other religions to mere belief while elevating Christian faith as Alpha and Omega of all faiths in Zimbabwe. However, the new error of RE in terms of implementing various religions came with the new curriculum which started in 2017 through Lazarus Dokora. The rise of Lazarus Dokora as a minister of education in Zimbabwe saw a shift from a monolithic curriculum to a pluralistic one where other religions can be in the curriculum. Lazarus Dokora was viewed as a controversial figure for reminding most Christians that schools were not churches as such praying and holding Christian gatherings was unnecessary and undemocratic. He was very clear that dominance of one's religious rites in public forums in a secular state¹⁵ (was problematic since it was "oppressive and exclusionary, exacerbating tensions between diverse groups within a multicultural society."¹⁶ (thus a pluralist religious curriculum as Kasomo contends "eliminates any suspicions and misunderstanding".¹⁷ Although Dokora appears to align the curriculum with the best practices of including many religions in the curriculum, Emmerson Mnangagwa, the President of Zimbabwe, resisted and viewed him as a destroyer of the legacy of Zimbabwean education disturbing the ideological tool that had always put Zimbabweans as a unified nation under ZANU PF.¹⁸ The new look of integrating various religions was perhaps seen as the undoing of capitalist relations of exploitation consequently weakening the ideology of ZANU-PF as the alpha and omega of Zimbabwean politics.¹⁹

While Mnangagwa downgraded the efforts of Dokora of introducing religions such as Islam, Hinduism, African Traditional Religion, and Buddhism, it was a positive move towards multi-representations of various religions into the curriculum to learn not repression as always anticipated by the regime. The representation by various religions, as Reardon contends eliminates "ignorance about the beliefs of others and the inviolability of human rights, often becomes an instrument for the manipulation of populations, winning their support and participation in the violation of the range of human rights related to the exercise of freedom of religion".²⁰ To implement the multi-representation of various religions, RE changed and became Family, Religious and Moral Education (FAREME).

Debates on the decline of religion in public schools

This section, in response to Question 2 of this article, discusses various trajectories that have the impetus to derail RE from the curriculum.

Lack of investment in RE teacher education

The challenge facing RE teaching of RE in Zimbabwe is that the training of RE teachers is taken as a luxury and unnecessary since the subject is easy and can be taught by anyone. In many instances, underperforming teachers in other subjects are pushed to teach RE. In other ways, teaching RE is associated with incompetence and teachers who are not knowledgeable about the subject. At present, very few teachers' colleges have RE as a pedagogy and a supply of teachers has come through universities from people who have majored in theology or religious studies without a pedagogy. The

¹⁵ Obediah Dodo, "Inter-Religious Conflicts: A Review of Zimbabwe's Religious Landscape, Post-Independence," *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies* 7, no. 2 (2017): 125.

¹⁶ Carrie Antal, "Reflections on Religious Nationalism, Conflict and Schooling in Developing Democracies: India and Israel in Comparative Perspective," *Compare* 38, no. 1 (2008): 87–102.

¹⁷ Daniel Kasomo, "The Position of African Traditional Religion in Conflict Prevention," 2010. 24.

¹⁸ The Zimbabwean, "Mnangagwa Names Dokora as 'A Destroyer of Zimbabwe's Legacy,'" 2017, <https://www.thezimbabwean.co/2017/11/mnangagwa-names-dokora-destroyer-zimbabwes-legacy/>.

¹⁹ Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Do Zimbabweans Exist?: Trajectories of Nationalism, National Identity Formation and Crisis in a Postcolonial State*, vol. 3 (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2009).

²⁰ B.A. Reardon, *Freedom of Religion and Belief: An Essential Human Right. A Companion Guide to a Set of Short Films on the Human Rights to the Freedom and Religion and Belief* (London: IARF, 2006).23.

study problematizes this approach since “teachers are the filters through which the mandated curriculum passes. Their understanding of it, and their enthusiasm, or boredom, with various aspects of it, colours its nature.”²¹ Schwartz further argues that “curriculum writers, with all good intentions, have compiled volumes of well-conceived educational action plans, choosing specific materials and activities for their pre-conceived target, curriculum receivers, students, only to find that the curriculum users, teachers, are not prepared for the innovations.”²² Thus, as long as Zimbabwean teacher education does not invest much in training teachers in religion, there is a likelihood of religious misrepresentation and under-teaching of concepts considered unfavorable by the assigned teachers. It presents teachers with the opportunity to manipulate the subject premised on the concept of “power behind closed doors”, where teachers decide what is best for them instead of achieving desired curriculum outcomes.²³ Thus, as long as the training of teachers is trivialized, the implication is that the curriculum would be downgraded and regarded as irrelevant, ultimately removed from the mainstream curriculum.

Culturally irrelevance of the curriculum

A curriculum that survives prioritises the culture of the people it seeks to serve. With reference to this paper, the curriculum should take into cognisance that the African religion is a critical element of the Zimbabwean people. Thus, this study agrees with Mokotso that “there is a form of de-culturalization through miseducation in the use of a pedagogy and curriculum that deliberately omits, distorts or trivializes the role and benefits of African religion.”²⁴ There is a growing trend within African people to revisit and adopt African religion, not only as a way of life but also in the curriculum. As long as the religions in the curriculum are foreign to the culture of the learners, there is a great likelihood that they will be treated as mere folklore which has less bearing on the lived realities of the African people. Based on this question, the relevance of the RE is questionable, especially with various dissenting voices coming from the African people. To remedy this situation, re-curriculisation is indispensable with the focus on ensuring the curriculum is relevant to the lived realities.

Limited employment opportunities

The critical question which is always posed by students selected to enroll for bachelor's degrees in RE is: What is there for me in terms of the profession? What job would I get after the completion of my studies? The honest response to this question is that each day the field experiences challenges of where to place its graduates besides churches, charity organisations, or religious shrines. For students, the idea of getting a qualification should correlate with what the qualification should offer. Since these questions are very difficult to answer, the field of RE faces great uncertainty. As a rescue plan for the field, RE and those working around RE should move towards an entrepreneurship agenda which would make religious curriculum prestigious among students. Reflecting on how religious people have created economies should be the focal point of teaching and learning so that learners can take advantage of best practices to ensure that religion benefits its adherence, not only spiritually but also in general livelihood. In short, the demise of the curriculum can be mitigated when the entrepreneurial approach is sought to promote its relevance. While arguing this way, weak framing can be repositioned as an advantage in allowing new insight into religious education towards cultivating entrepreneurship mentality among students.

Continued abuse of religion by politics

The post-independence space has prioritized religion as a key factor for the sustainable and continued entronement of ZANU-PF. One can say with confidence that ZANU-PF has over the years used religious constituency as a harbinger for loyalty to a political ideology. As such, religious leaders of large religious organisations like Nehemiah Mutendi, Andrew Wutaunashe, Uebert Angels, Passion Java, and Emmanuel Makandiwa are staunch sympathizers of the regime. The loyalty has led Magaiza

²¹ Morey Schwartz, “For Whom Do We Write the Curriculum?,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 38, no. 4 (2006): 449.

²² Schwartz, “For Whom Do We Write the Curriculum?” 450.

²³ A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

²⁴ Isaac Mokotso Rasebate, “Syncretism of Basotho Traditional Religion and Christianity: Gateway to the Syncretistic Teaching of Basotho Traditional Religion and Christianity in Lesotho Schools,” *African Journal of History and Culture* 7, no. 7 (2015): 160.

to pose critical questions “How do respected men of the cloth become drawn irresistibly to normalise what is not normal”?²⁵ In fact, they [religious leaders] start from the periphery, wearing the label of “technocrats”, but soon find themselves deep in the cesspool, wearing scarves and chanting ridiculous slogans.²⁶ From Magaiza's sentiments, there is an observation that it is not normal for religious leaders to support repressive regimes which have not sought the goodwill of the people of Zimbabwe. The normal approach would be to call politicians to order in terms of respecting constitutionalism and human rights, but apparently, they decide to turn a blind eye to the evil of the regime. To this end, people question the role of religion in the democratization process, which ultimately reduces its impact on the schooling system due to its failure to usher favorable conditions for human survival. When religion is used in society, and “under normal circumstances, people hope that their experiences and those of their loved ones will be positive and nurtured through religion” but in Zimbabwe, religion, as used in political space, can be described as a social pathology.²⁷

Hence, this can be correlated with how the subject is treated in the curriculum. If religion can be used as an oppression tool, what could be the logic of its existence in the curriculum that seeks democratization? Based on the foregoing, the critics of RE find the subject to be patriarchal, oppressive, and not open to new possibilities to forge a democratic society. It is based on this argument that the why not religion in schools becomes alive and well to confront all forms of pedagogy that undermine democracy. However, the curriculum construction should tease new questions which can align RE with the need for the learners to question, problematize and challenge the use of religion to enact oppression. In its current form, the curriculum promotes docility and a high sense of morality, as opposed to critical thinking. The emphasis on morality only with the aim of creating docility has rendered the subject questionable. Hence, this study agrees with White that if religious education continues to have its traditional moral remit, there is a further danger of confusion, not only from within religious education itself, but as the result of conflicting messages reaching them from different parts of the curriculum.²⁸ It submits that for RE to be relevant, there is a need for the “existing social conditions within and beyond classrooms to critique dominant arrangements of power and the creation of platforms to enable the participation of marginalised students.”²⁹

REFLECTIONS

RE as a study in the field of curriculum is at a critical stage in terms of its existence. The why not question to RE in school is a wake-up call for scholars to rethink the content, marketability and relevance of the subject. There is an indication that the field is losing momentum in schools and consequently there is a decline in scholarships which seek to boost the field. In reflecting on RE, especially considering Question 2, the following submissions are made on RE from a curriculum perspective.

- a. The demise of RE in the curriculum is a serious concern. It robs learners of various benefits associated with the study of religion. It cannot be denied that all people directly or indirectly are religious in nature and there is a consistent need for religious gratification in praxis and pedagogical.
- b. When religion is practiced it is associated with various perceptions about the other. In most cases, perceptions are not validated and can trigger prejudice. Once prejudice centres conversation on religion, there is a great likelihood of conflict exacerbated by the ignorance of the other. Wars which emerge as a result of the ignorance of the other are hard to end and the curriculum should provide a space where various religions can communicate and find common ground for development as opposed to hate and conflict. Hence, the study

²⁵ Alex Magaiza, “The Regime and Its Enablers. Saturday Big Read.,” Saturday Big Read, 2019, <https://bigsr.africa/bsr-the-regime-and-its-enablers-d27/>.

²⁶ Magaiza, “The Regime and Its Enablers. Saturday Big Read.”

²⁷ Stephen A Kent, “Religious Justifications for Child Sexual Abuse in Cults and Alternative Religions.,” *International Journal of Cultic Studies* 3 (2012).50.

²⁸ John White, “Should Religious Education Be a Compulsory School Subject?,” *British Journal of Religious Education* 26, no. 2 (2004): 158..

²⁹ Milton Nkoane, “Critical Liberatory Inclusive Pedagogy: Arguing for a Zero-Defect Discourse,” *Acta Academica* 43, no. 4 (2011): 113.

emphasizes the notion that “to manage identity and diversity which help learners define ‘otherness’ and to learn to live with different people harmoniously” is indispensable to contribute to the conversations of world peace.³⁰ Informed by the foregoing, the death of religion in the curriculum would be a disservice to the learners we seek to educate.

- c. The field of RE is at its deathbed in most post-colonial countries in Africa. It is seen as an irrelevant subject to direct development partly because religion as an institution was associated with colonialization and remained in place post-colonization. Some radical thinkers would associate the curriculum with colonization. It is critical that conversations shaping the field of RE evolve around the need for a decolonized curriculum. It is not the ambit of this paper to describe what a decolonized curriculum would look like but the point it raises is that conversations towards decolonizing the curriculum are important and should be inclusive and sensitive to the dynamics of educating a child in the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

This paper has responded to two questions that located the dynamics of the field of RE in Zimbabwe and some countries. The sticking point is that RE as a field of curriculum has suffered from weak framing, which allows it to be abused and undermined. In addition, the lack of qualified teachers in the field pushes the subject to the peripheral. The paper concludes by making some critical reflections on RE as a pedagogy in the context of extinction. Of note is the decline of scholarship especially in the African space that focuses on Religious Education. Once scholarship is derailed, the existence of the subject as a forceful factor for human development is undermined and thwarted. The existence of RE would be theoretical and its praxis would save the interest of the few. Hence, rejuvenation of the field is necessary, and urgent so that learners are not deprived of the benefits associated with the RE curriculum.

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³⁰ Francisco Diez de Velasco, “Religion, Identity and Education for Peace: Beyond the Dichotomies: Confessional/Non-Confessional and Global/Local,” in *Peace Education and Religious Plurality* (Routledge, 2013), 78.

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