

Teachers' Views on Factors that Militate against the Effective Teaching and Learning of Religious Studies in Selected Secondary Schools of Binga District in Zimbabwe

Douglas Gasva^{1*}, Frank Marandure², Nkululeko Sibanda³

¹Quality Assurance Unit, Zimbabwe Open University Harare, Zimbabwe

²Ministry of Primary & Secondary Education, Binga District, Zimbabwe Harare, Zimbabwe

³Centre for Student Management, Zimbabwe Open University Harare, Zimbabwe

*Corresponding author: Douglas Gasva

| Received: 12.11.2018 | Accepted: 22.11.2018 | Published: 27.01.2019

DOI: [10.36347/sjahss.2018.v07i01.004](https://doi.org/10.36347/sjahss.2018.v07i01.004)

Abstract

Original Research Article

This study sought to explore factors that militate against the effective teaching and learning of Religious Studies at Ordinary Level in Zimbabwe. The qualitative research methodology was preferred as it enabled the researchers to have an in-depth understanding of the problem. The multiple case study method was adopted and involved five secondary schools in Binga District of Matabeleland North Province. A purposively selected sample of twenty teachers (n=20) was used while interviews, questionnaires and observation were utilised as research techniques to generate data. The major findings were that there was lack of qualified and experienced personnel, inadequate teaching and learning resources, lack of instructional supervision, shortage of classrooms and furniture as well as low morale and motivation of the teachers. The researchers concluded that the teaching and learning of Religious Studies faced several challenges within the selected secondary schools but the teachers who were the sole participants believed that these were not insurmountable as they could be eliminated if all concerned stakeholders would work together in order to address them. Accordingly, the study recommended, among other things, that the district should seek for permission from the responsible authority to employ more qualified and experienced Religious Studies teachers and that priority should be given to the construction and acquisition of appropriate resources meant to promote the effective teaching and learning of the subject. Furthermore, staff development programmes should be practiced in order to enhance the teachers' pedagogic skills as well as promote quality Religious Studies teaching and learning in the area under study.

Keywords: teachers, militate, teaching, learning, Religious Studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Silver [1] echoed by Sample and Copeland [2] posit that it is critical to examine and understand factors that have a bearing on pedagogical issues as it essentially affects the performance of learners and the general quality of the delivery of the school curriculum. The current study focused on exploring the views of Ordinary Level Religious Studies teachers in the marginalised Binga District of Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe regarding factors that militate against the effective teaching and learning of the subject. Religious Studies is among the subjects offered in Zimbabwean secondary schools and like most school subjects, its offering has been faced with some challenges.

Historically, it is notable that the arrival of missionaries in Zimbabwe since 1859 was an important

factor in understanding the character of the evolution of Religious Studies as a distinct school subject facilitated through education as Christian missionaries played an important part in the history of Southern Africa during the nineteenth century [5]. It is imperative to note that Religious Studies was first introduced by missionaries as 'Religious Instruction' and, as noted by Zvobgo [3], the discipline was introduced into the formal secondary school curriculum during the colonial era, hence, its perennial colonial and cultural bias towards the Christian orthodox.

Marasha *et al.* [4] aver that soon after the attainment of independence in Zimbabwe, the government, through the then Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, recommended the inclusion of other religions including African Traditional Religion as key components of Religious Education in schools. Consequently, Religious Studies became an inclusive

subject pursued in both primary and secondary schools with the broad goal of conscientising learners to a number of religious beliefs, values, attitudes and practices, including from an African perspective. The subject, thus, essentially takes a central position in ensuring the moral and spiritual development and well-being of learners. It is against this background that this study sought to explore the different factors that militate against the effective teaching and learning of Religious Studies in selected secondary schools of Binga District in Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe.

Statement of the problem

As much as any other subject of the secondary school curriculum in Zimbabwe and possibly other developing countries, the teaching and learning of Religious Studies in marginalised Binga District is likely to face some challenges which inevitably militate against its effective teaching and learning as a school subject.

Study Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyse factors that militate against the effective teaching and learning of Religious Studies in selected secondary schools of Binga district.

Based on the above purpose, the study was guided by the following questions:

- What are the factors that hinder the effective teaching and learning of Religious Studies at secondary school ordinary level in Binga district?
- Which unique problems are being faced by Ordinary Level Religious Studies teachers in Binga district?
- What can be done to improve the teaching and learning of Religious Studies in the area under study?

Significance of the study

The researchers conceived that the findings of the study would determine school based challenges in the teaching of Religious Studies in the area under study which is expected to help teachers to improve the art of teaching the subject. Furthermore, it was considered that the findings would lead to the discovering of student problems in the learning of Religious Studies within the selected schools. Overall, researchers are of the view that this will enable the different stakeholders, namely, the community, school, teachers and learners to work hand in glove in order to enhance the teaching and learning of the subject.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Scope of teaching and learning in the context of Ordinary Level Religious Studies

Teaching is generally considered to be any form of instruction with the intention of facilitating learning. On the other hand, learning has been defined as the lifelong process of transformation and experience

into knowledge, skills, behaviours, values and attitudes. It entails any relatively permanent change in behaviour that occurs as a result of experience in various spheres of life and through instruction (<http://www.missiontolearn.com/definition-of-learning>). Effective teaching and learning of a school subject happens when a teacher provides enough guidance and intellectual support for learners to be able to swim out of their depth to go just a little further intellectually than they would be able to go alone [7]. In that regard, the teacher is a critical tool in the teaching-learning process as he or she offers the necessary guidance for the pupils.

As articulated by ZIMSEC [6], Religious Studies at Ordinary secondary school level enables learners to develop:

- An insight into the religious and spiritual areas of experience, particularly the African and Christian traditions which have profoundly affected their culture;
- An awareness of the contribution of religion in the formation of the patterns of belief and behaviour which may enhance or hinder development;
- A respect for people whose religious beliefs differ from their own, and an increasing spirit of tolerance and co-operation among the various religious groups; and
- The ability to investigate, analyse facts and draw conclusions on different religious issues for the purpose of positively applying them in daily life.

The above reflects the importance of offering the subject in Zimbabwean and other schools largely for the purpose of shaping learners' religious philosophies and mindset.

Factors that hinder the effective teaching and learning of Religious Studies

For teaching and learning to effectively take place, appropriate resources should generally be adequate. As noted by Duncan [8], the adequate provision of teaching and learning resources enhances academic performance and the motivation of pupils. The same source further says that learning resources help to improve student performance and, therefore, need to be provided for the benefit of the learners. Ndlovu [9], reports that most school libraries are poorly equipped in terms of Bibles, commentaries, textbooks and other resources for use, which is consequently a big drawback to those who want to excel in the subject area.

Lack of qualified personnel is another critical factor that hinders the effective teaching and learning of any school subject. Notably, the training of teachers and administrators in the education system improves quality and confidence in the execution of their duties [10]. The same source avers that the deployment of competent teachers in the classroom also boosts the confidence of

learners which often results in the promotion of high student outcomes. Linked to this factor, appropriate teacher qualifications and relevant teaching experience are also necessary facets as they also foster teachers' competence in the delivery of the subject content as well as general subject management [11].

Furthermore, Haralambos and Holborn [12] posit that the manner in which teachers react to individual students can affect their educational career and feelings towards the subject; hence, the streaming approach that is practiced by most of the schools has worsened the situation as Religious Studies is often offered to slow learners or the less gifted classes. Thus, streaming of learners according to academic ability is one of the reasons why some of them do not attend some lessons or take a subject area seriously for they are considered less capable of doing some subjects areas such as Mathematics and Science. For Jackson [13], lack of interest and poor academic performance at are some of the reasons which adversely affect school performance, and, some learners consequently end up dropping Religious Studies as a last resort.

A related study by Ndlovu [9] revealed lack of motivation is one of the factors that influence the teaching and learning of any school subject, with Religious Studies not being an exception. Thus, career guidance needs to be done at school so as to motivate students and letting them know the future careers they can do after studying Religious Studies [5]. Teachers also face the problem of lack of audio-visual and electronic instructional media in the teaching of most school subjects while student performance is also affected by the quality and quantity of teaching and learning materials available [14]. Hence, lack of appropriate teaching and learning materials is a huge hindrance in the effective teaching and learning of Religious Studies.

Nondo [15], has questioned the continuous dominance of Christianity in the teaching and learning of Religious Studies lessons at the expense of other religions such as, African traditional religion. Due to the presence of a significant number of followers of religions other than Christianity in the Zimbabwean society, there has been an enormous growth in public interest in the study of other world religions. A religious consultative conference held in 1981 revealed that Religious Studies should incorporate the teaching of other religions besides Christianity if it is to be effectively taught and learnt (Religious Education Consultative Conference Report, 1981 cited in UNESCO [16]).

The Zimbabwean government, through the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture in 1984 made an attempt to broaden the scope of Religious Studies, using the life experience approach, where learners were expected to study beyond the Bible and

interrogate religious concepts in their own communities and contexts [17]. Hence, significant attempts were made to incorporate other world religions including African Traditional Religion but this has not yielded remarkable results as up to today, Religious Studies is still largely Christian centred which has had detrimental effects in its teaching and learning. Gundani and Ndlovu [5] recommended that in a multi-religious country, the multi-faith approach should be utilised, hence, the teaching of Religious Studies should not be Christocentric, but rather pluralistic in nature. Religious pluralism in the teaching and learning of Religious Studies enables pupils to be tolerant and to respect other pupils' religious beliefs different from theirs; which is in harmony with the principles of offering the subject in a multi-religious nation like Zimbabwe.

Some of the advantages of adopting religious pluralism in the teaching of Religious Studies as noted by Gundani and Ndlovu (*ibid*: 3) include the fact that;

- It develops pupil's interest in the subject of religion
- the pupils develop a critical appreciation of religion in formulating their own philosophical theology of life;
- it enables religious education to be open, hence, neither aims to undermine beliefs held by other pupils but rather, to develop knowledge, understanding and ability to evaluate varied religious issues and ideas;
- The teacher does not become an evangelist or preacher, but he or she becomes an honest guide, co-explorer and a catalyst in religious issues.

The foregoing, literature shows that religious pluralism in schools will no doubt promote the effective teaching and learning of Religious Studies as both the teacher and the learners will adopt an impartial approach.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research approach, which is largely concerned with understanding social phenomena from the perspective of the participants, was adopted [18]. This enabled the researchers to have an in-depth assessment of the factors that militate against the effective teaching and learning of Religious Studies in the area under study [19]. The researcher used the multiple case study method which involved five secondary schools in Binga, thereby mitigating the challenge of subjectivity in qualitative inquiries [19, 20]. Stakes [12] in Bogopane [21] buttressed the researchers' selection of the case study by stressing that it allows for in-depth analysis of the phenomena under study.

The study used a sample of twenty participants (n=20) who were all Ordinary Level Religious Studies teachers from five selected secondary schools in Binga District in the year 2017. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants since it was found appropriate as

it allowed for the identification of subjects that were representative of the population and ensured the exclusion of non-suitable elements [22, 23]. Data were generated using interviews, questionnaires, and observation. These multiple data sources were essentially used for triangulation purposes in order to get a more holistic picture and to cross check information [24-27].

Thus, interviews were used to obtain data from head teachers while questionnaires were used to obtain data from the Religious Studies teachers. Aspects such as availability of qualified teachers, physical structures, instructional resources, supervision of teachers and student performance were used as the basis for developing items for generating the sought data. In harmony with qualitative studies, the generated data were qualitatively analysed which involved categorising and organising data in search of patterns and meanings that emerged thereof [28, 29].

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study were centred on revealing the major factors that militated against the effective teaching and learning of Religious Studies from the perspective of twenty teachers who participated in the study.

Lack of qualified and experienced personnel

Out of the 20 teachers, only 5(25%) were qualified Religious Studies classroom practitioners with a Diploma in Education from different secondary school teacher training colleges in Zimbabwe. Related to the qualification of staff, the study revealed that most schools in Binga District did not offer Religious Studies due to lack of qualified personnel. In that regard, Hanson [10] posits that the training of teachers improves their confidence in the execution of their duties as well as the general quality of education. While some of the teachers in the area under study are partially qualified, Ben-Peretz [30] argues that teachers need appropriate qualifications and expertise for carrying out curriculum functions particularly the teaching of specific school subjects. The results were consistent with earlier findings by Maicibi [31] who noted that when qualified and experienced employees are available, it can capitalise on available resources in order to realise institutional goals.

Inadequate teaching and learning resources

Data collected showed that all the teachers (100%) stated that textbook shortage was one of the chief factors that militated against the effective teaching and learning of Religious Studies. The participants maintained that learners are disadvantaged in that they have very limited reading material for Religious Studies, which consequently affects them when they need to add-on to notes given to them by teachers. Participants agreed with Watkins [11] who says that shortages of pedagogical equipment are particularly

damaging, because teaching tools, such as textbooks, are significant determinants of student achievement. Not surprisingly, learners who have textbooks and other reading materials perform far much better than those who do not have enough reading materials [11].

In that regard, the study revealed that most students generally did not have enough Religious Studies textbooks to read and/or study, hence, they encountered challenges in reinforcing what they would have learnt during teacher-presented lessons. In line with the World Bank [32] observation, this study inferred that the majority of the students' low test scores in Religious Studies for the work given to them by teachers was largely due to shortage of reading materials to complement teachers' lesson notes. The World Bank (ibid) also observed that low test scores within the developing world is generally linked to non-availability of teaching and learning resources particularly textbooks in most schools.

Lack of instructional supervision

From the twenty participants, as many as 16(80%) teachers disagreed with the view that their supervision was done regularly at the schools. Most participants were of the view that the school heads and Teachers in Charge themselves were not qualified in Religious Studies, hence, were reluctant to supervise them which consequently compromised on the teachers' performance in their teaching role. More often than not, most participants indicated that they could go for more than a year without being supervised, yet, teachers offering other subjects were frequently supervised and advised on areas they needed to improve. The results were consistent with earlier findings by Okendu [33] who noted that lack of instructional supervision and follow-up support by management often results in teachers being reluctant in their work and lacking the support they needed to promote high learner participation and performance in specific subject areas.

Shortage of classrooms and furniture

Almost all participants (90%) at the schools studied indicated that there was critical shortage of classrooms for utilisation during lessons. This severely compromised on the quality Religious Studies lessons largely because as a subject that is not considered as core, priority for occupation of available classrooms and allocation of furniture is often given to other subjects such as Mathematics, Science and English. Thus, almost all respondents disagreed with the view that there were enough classrooms and furniture in the area under study. The study results concur with earlier findings by Fonseca and Conboy [34] who found out that the school's physical facilities particularly classrooms should be developed and shared impartially because they interfere with the teaching and learning process of less prioritised school subjects. Furthermore, the findings were noted to be in harmony with the UNESCO [16] study which indicated that the

availability of enough and appropriate physical resources in schools was key to the successful teaching and learning process, whether in the developed or the developing world.

Low morale and motivation of teachers

A total of 8(40%) participants were of the view that Religious Studies' morale and motivation was low due to a number of reasons, including low salaries, poor working conditions and the inferiority complex that they experience due to the fact that the subject they teach is often looked down upon by the school in general, other teachers as well students. In a related study in South African, Steyn [20] also revealed that low motivation and morale among teachers simply breeds discontent which negatively affects their participation in school based activities including classroom practice. For Steyn (ibid), this has detrimental effects on learners' interest and achievement with regards the subject area concerned, in this case, Religious Studies. In the same vein, Yorke's [35] theory asserts that teachers should be motivated by school authorities in different ways in order to promote their effectiveness in teaching and other school related activities.

Lack of staff development programmes for teachers

Some of the participants (30%) were of the view that they lacked staff development programmes which they believed were necessary in enhancing their contemporary knowledge of Religious Studies and pedagogic skills. Thus, lack of staff development for the teachers resulted in poor grooming of Religious Studies teachers as they would lack critical skills in instructional processes, classroom interactions and management which are meant to promote their effectiveness within the teaching and learning enterprise. Researchers noted this to be in harmony with earlier findings by Heaney [36] which revealed that in Africa and many parts of the developing world, ongoing professional development for teachers of different subjects is essential if quality education for learners is to be realised. Furthermore, as teachers have the most direct, sustained contact with learners, as well as considerable control over the teaching and learning environment, staff development is, thus, critical for them as it enhances quality education [37].

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study concluded that the following were the major factors which militated against the effective teaching and learning of Religious Studies in the area under study:

- shortage of qualified and experienced Religious Studies teachers;
- Shortage or total unavailability of Religious Studies textbooks;
- Lack of instructional supervision and staff development
- Low morale and motivation of teachers

- Shortage of classrooms and furniture
- Lack of staff development programmes for teachers.

The researchers also concluded that, notwithstanding the prevalence of the noted factors that militate against the effective teaching and learning of Religious Studies in the area under study, participants, however, believed that these challenges were not insurmountable, hence, could be eliminated if all concerned stakeholders would work together for the effective teaching and learning of the subject.

In light of the findings and conclusions of the study, the researchers came up with some recommended which follow:

- The district of Binga should seek for permission from the Civil Service Commission of Zimbabwe to employ more qualified and experienced teachers for Religious Studies so that more schools in the district can offer Religious Studies and that it is offered effectively as a subject at ordinary level;
- The schools should prioritise the acquisition of relevant textbooks and enough equipment in their budgets so that pupils have access to reading materials which they can even take home for homework;
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should step up efforts in providing physical structures for poor schools and also engage donor agencies in order to assist with the provision of teaching and learning facilities for pupils in the area under study;
- Instructional supervision should be done by school management as well as other district and provincial personnel with the requisite qualifications and experience in Religious Studies;
- The school should hold properly planned staff development sessions for the professional growth of Religious Studies teachers. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should also encourage teachers who possess Certificates in Education and Diplomas in Education to upgrade their qualifications by joining universities to obtain degree qualifications in Religious Studies.

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