

# **Ideological Posturing and National Curriculum Policy: Exploring Dual-Mode Religious Education for Secondary Schools in Malawi**

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## **Abstract**

This article draws from a large study that examined the understandings of selected stakeholders of the dual-mode Religious Education curriculum policy change for secondary schools in Malawi. It explores some of the insights on the impact of ideology on curriculum policy through the use of two sets of ideological constructs, namely, mono-faith and multi-faith RE and confessional and non-confessional RE. These constructs also forms the theoretical framework of this article. Insights gained through the use of a phenomenological methodology engaged a multi-category elite sample of Ministry of Education officials, secondary school head teachers (principals), and leaders of nationally organised faith-communities. The findings suggest that conflicting ideologies create contradictions for the introduction of new curriculum policy.

**Keywords:** Ideology, religious education, mono-faith, multi-faith, confessional, non-confessional, dual-mode R.E.

## **Introduction**

The dual-mode Religious Education (RE) curriculum policy change was introduced in Malawi in 2001 as a replacement of a multi-faith RE

curriculum (O'Dala 2001; Salanjira 2003). In 2000, the Ministry of Education introduced RME as a multi-faith curriculum to replace Bible Knowledge (BK) as a mono-faith curriculum (Salanjira 2003). It was a continuation of the RE curriculum changes that had already taken place in primary school teacher training colleges in 1987 (Phiri 1988) and primary schools in 1991 (Ministry of Education 1991; Salanjira 2003). However, when the change was extended to secondary school level in 2000, the Christian faith-communities opposed multi-faith RE in favour of mono-faith RE while the Muslim faith-community supported the curriculum change. It was because of that controversy that the Ministry of Education introduced a dual-mode RE curriculum policy in 2001(O'Dala 2001).

The term 'dual-mode RE curriculum' is used here to describe a curriculum based on two parallel syllabuses, namely BK and Religious and Moral Education (RME). BK is mono-faith, drawing its content from the Bible as the scripture for Christianity. On the other hand, RME is multi-faith, with its content 'cutting across the three major religions of Malawi, namely Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions' (Ministry of Education 1998: iv).

The term religion is used, here, in its generic sense to encompass all various forms, expressions, manifestations, or traditions of religion in its diversity (Harrison 1990; Sharpe 1986; Preus 1987). RE can be based on one or several religions.

This article draws from a major study which focused on contesting spaces in the understandings regarding the dual-mode RE curriculum policy change for secondary schools in Malawi using the perspectives of leaders of nationally organised faith-communities, Ministry of Education officials, and secondary school head teachers (principals). The overall purpose in the major study was to explore how these three elite categories of research participants understood the introduction of the dual-mode RE curriculum. In this article, the ideological impact on curriculum policy is examined, using the case of the dual-mode RE curriculum for secondary schools in Malawi, which was introduced in 2001. It begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework used. The methodology which was driven by a phenomenological approach is then presented. Thereafter the findings which consist of several themes are represented followed by the conclusion.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The impact of ideology on education is universally accepted and any national educational system, with its curriculum, is acknowledged as a reflection of ideologies of dominant and influential groups in society (Apple 2008; 2004; Bertram, Fotheringham & Harley 2000; Chisholm 2005; Glatthorn, Boschee, & Whitehead 2006; Kelly 1999; Lawton 1983; Matheson 2004; Meighan 1986; Sutton & Levinson 2001; Vincent 1995). Educational ideologies stress, among other things, the value dimension of knowledge and exert a great influence on the type of curriculum design used, the stated purpose of the curriculum and the nature of planned learners' experiences (Lawton 1983). This article explores the impact of ideology on national curriculum through the use of two sets or binaries of ideological positions that serve as its analytical framework. It is suggested that the curriculum of Religious Education (RE) is one area where the impact of ideology can easily be noticed.

There are several senses associated with the term ideology (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner 1980; Althusser 1971; Apple 2004; Gergen 2006; Kelly 1999; Marx 1972). One sense takes an intellectual posture, describing ideology as a science of ideas while another sense takes a political stance, conceptualising ideology as a political doctrine (Vincent 1995). Althusser (1971) observes that ideology works by disguising its ideological nature, becoming, in the process, naturalized, automatised and common sense. When this happens, people become ideologically positioned as independent of ideological determination (Fairclough 1995). In another sense, Fairclough (1995) speaks of different locations of ideology in language practices that are closely related to the concept of hegemony or domination as proposed by Gramsci (1971). To that extent, Fairclough (1995: 82) argues that 'discoursal practices are ideologically invested in so far as they contribute to sustaining or undermining power relations'. Thus ideological differences have led to educational contradictions in the dual-mode RE curriculum and are, in themselves, a manifestation of attempts to sustain or undermine domination. Furthermore, for some scholars, like Marx (1972), ideology denotes practical ineffectiveness, an illusion and loss of reality while others conceptualise ideology as a set of beliefs and values held by a group of people about a social phenomenon (Apple 2004; Gergen 2006; Kelly 1999).

Within the context of education, an ideology can be described as a set of beliefs and values held by a group of people about what education should be in schools (Kelly 1999). Since ideologies are reflected in any curriculum (Lawton 1980; 1983), it follows that each subject or body of subjects offered in any country reflects beliefs and values about what education should be in that subject or body of subjects.

The theoretical framework for this article draws from the notion of ideology, with a focus on two binaries in the area of RE curriculum theory and practice. These are, namely, mono-faith versus multi-faith and confessional versus non-confessional ideologies. It is suggested that the conflict between these two sets of ideologies can lead to the adoption of a curriculum policy with educational contradictions, and the dual-mode RE curriculum policy for secondary schools in Malawi reflects such contradictions.

A mono-faith ideology supports RE that draws its content from one religious or faith tradition such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or African Religion at the exclusion of other religions. The term African Religion is used for African Traditional Religion since it is increasingly becoming more favoured than African Traditional Religion, among some scholars, because of the negative connotation of the word 'traditional' (Steyn 2004). Mono-faith RE is also described as single-faith or single-tradition programme (Chidester, Mitchell, Omar & Phiri 1994). On the other hand, a multi-faith ideology supports RE which draws its content from many religious or faith traditions. RE informed by this ideology is also described as multi-tradition approach (Chidester *et al.* 1994). This article argues that the impact of mono-faith and multi-faith ideologies is reflected on the dual-mode RE curriculum.

A confessional ideology conceptualises RE as a religious activity, aimed at leading learners to a confession of, and a commitment to, a particular faith while a non-confessional ideology aims at developing in learners critical knowledge and understanding of RE as a crucial dimension of human and social life (Carr 2006; Chidester *et al.* 1994; Grimmitt 2000; Hull 2007, 1984; Summers & Waddington 1996; Wood 1984). Thus in the case of mono-faith and multi-faith ideologies, the impact of confessional and non-confessional ideologies can be easily noticed in the educational contradictions embedded in the dual-mode RE curriculum.

The substantial claim in this article is that the dual-mode RE curriculum reflects a conflict of ideological posturing about the role of RE in public schools among the influential stakeholders in Malawi. Such ideological conflict can result in educational contradictions about the role of RE in public schools. The dual-mode RE curriculum for secondary schools in Malawi represents a case where mono-faith and multi-faith as well as confessional and non-confessional RE ideologies are at work. Educational contradictions are created in terms of RE curriculum theory and practice. Such contradictions are also reflected in the understandings expressed by the three elite categories of research participants namely, Ministry of Education officials, secondary school head teachers, and faith-community leaders.

In terms of research on RE curriculum theory and practice, studies have largely focused on the debates surrounding many areas. Some foreground confessional and non-confessional pedagogy of RE (Carr 2006; Grimmitt 1987; 2000; Shepherd 1984; Wood 1984) while other highlight various conceptions of teaching and learning religion, in public schools, such as those portraying RE as a religious and an educational activity, or sacred and secular activity (Hull 1984, 2007; Sendor 1983; 1984a; 1984b; Sherman 1988; Smart 1998); different RE curriculum options for public education (Carr 2006; Chidester *et al.* 1994; Grimmitt 2000; Hull 2007; Slattery 2006; Summers & Waddington 1996). There are also those who emphasise RE approaches such as ‘a single-tradition approach, a multiple single-tradition approach, and a multi-tradition’ (Chidester *et al.* 1994: 19).

There is even an attempt, among some scholars, to differentiate between the terms ‘religious education’ and ‘religion education’ (Chidester *et al.* 1994; Steyn 2004). The former is used to describe RE as a religious activity and the latter as an educational activity. However, the commonest term used by many scholars is ‘religious education’.

Furthermore, research in the field reflects a variety of conceptions about the teaching and learning of RE in schools (Hull 1984; 2007). The conceptions differ according to historical and socio-political contexts that RE is intended to serve (Chidester *et al.* 1996). From the review of literature it can be suggested that there is no universally accepted conceptualisation of RE for public schools. The various conceptions are problematic issues for RE curriculum policy in contemporary society and need attention of scholars if the teaching of religion is to remain meaningful in our contemporary

society (Slattery 2006). Commenting on RE as a contemporary problem, Wardekker and Miedema (2007: 76) observe that:

In the present time, the goals, contents, and position of religious education in schools are by no means self-evident. Instead, religious education has become a prime example of an area of which even its right to exist is contested between various groups with an interest in education.

It is to that extent that the dual-mode RE policy is a prime example of a curriculum as a hotly contested space (Apple 2004) and a ‘battleground of competing influences and ideologies’ (Kelly 1999: 167). For instance, the BK syllabus is mono-faith while the RME syllabus is multi-faith in approach. These two approaches reflect different RE conceptions. Since mono-faith RE involves the teaching and learning of religion based on one faith while multi-faith RE draws its content from many faiths, the inclusion of BK and RME in the school curriculum can be seen as an attempt to cater for groups of people with different ideological positions.

Furthermore, mono-faith and multi-faith RE differently determine the pedagogy of RE. The term pedagogy is used here to denote the theory of teaching and learning religion, encompassing aims, curriculum content, and methodology of RE. Grimmitt (2000: 1) defines pedagogy as ‘a science of teaching and learning embodying both curriculum and methodology’. From the literature it can be suggested that whatever the definition of pedagogy, its fundamental concern is to relate the process of teaching to that of learning on the part of the learner (Simon 1981).

In pedagogic terms, mono-faith and multi-faith as well as confessional and non-confessional ideologies reflect what various groups, with an interest in education, believe and value to be the role of RE in public schools. The mono-faith ideology supports teaching and learning that helps a learner to have knowledge and understanding of one religion or faith. As a single-tradition programme, it can take different curriculum forms, with different intentions. Chidester *et al.* (1994: 42) aptly observe that:

Some single-tradition programmes are designed to encourage in pupils a particular development in faith. Other programmes place

greater emphasis upon the study of doctrinal, textual, or historical content. Still others seek to balance an academic study of the religious tradition with faith development. This variety in single-tradition approaches has been particularly evident in programmes of Christian religion education. In principle, however, this range of options for single-tradition approaches could be found in the development of religion education programmes designed to serve the religious interests of any faith community.

Various single-traditions reflect different ideological positions about mono-faith RE in public education. On the other hand, multi-faith ideology espouses RE pedagogy based on many religions, aimed at helping learners to develop wider knowledge and understanding of religion. Chidester *et al.* (1994) describe this pedagogy as multiple-tradition approach. It seeks to provide learners 'with an opportunity to learn about religion by studying many religions' (Chidester *et al.* 1994: 45). Thus, in pedagogic terms, any RE curriculum policy reflects an option about the teaching and learning of religion informed by one or many ideologies.

Understood from a perspective of politics of the school curriculum, BK and RME can be perceived as two oppositional spaces accommodating competing ideologies and demands about what should be taught as RE in the public schools. In the main, the theory of politics of the school curriculum, maintains that different people informed by different ideologies, contest, influence, or attempt to influence, the conduct of education in the school (Apple 2008; 2004; Chisholm 2005; Cornbleth 1990; Glatthorn *et al.* 2006; Iannacone 1983; Lawton 1980; 1983; McNeil 2006; Thomas 1983).

## **Methodology**

A phenomenological methodology (Creswell 2003; Haralambos & Holborn 1991; Patton 2002; Pollio, Henley & Thompson 1997; van Manen 1990) was used to explore the understandings regarding the dual-mode RE curriculum policy change for secondary schools in Malawi. Perspectives of Ministry of Education officials, secondary schools teachers, and leaders of nationally organised faith-communities were used within an interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative data was generated using in-depth interviews with a purposive

sample of nine Ministry of Education officials, as curriculum policy-makers and bureaucrats; and six leaders of nationally organised faith-communities, as stakeholders in education whose public theology influences public policy. de Gruchy (2007) maintains that public theology refers to the relationship between theology and politics in specific locations. More specifically, it is used here to denote how theology influences public policy in education.

In addition, a questionnaire was administered to a purposive sample of 54 secondary school head teachers. The head teachers were requested to describe, in detail and in writing, their understanding regarding the dual-mode RE curriculum policy change. The questionnaire was used instead of in-depth interviews because of the relatively large size of the sample compared to that of Ministry of Education officials and faith-community leaders. As leaders in making curriculum decisions and choices at school level, the head teachers were a rich source of information on the dual-mode RE curriculum policy.

To supplement data generated through the in-depth interviews and the questionnaires, a review of documents was conducted. Rich qualitative data was produced from sources such as circulars, minutes on RE curriculum meetings, and newspaper articles commenting on the controversy surrounding the policy change from mono-faith to multi-faith RE curriculum in Malawi (Chitosi 2000a; 2000b; O'Dala 2001; Semu 2000). Thus, although in-depth interviews are recommended for a phenomenological study (Creswell 2003; Patton 2002; Sarantakos 2005), questionnaire and document analysis were used on the basis of their strength to generate data on the understandings regarding the dual-mode RE curriculum.

Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006; Marshall & Rossman 2006) was used to analyse selected data from the sources mentioned. For anonymity and confidentiality (Terre-Blanche, Durrheim & Painter 2006), code names have been used in reporting the findings. For the nine Ministry of Education officials, codes ranging from MOE-1 to MOE-9 have been used while codes ranging from FC-1 to FC-6 have been used for the six nationally organised faith-communities, and codes ranging from HT-1 to HT-54 for the 54 head teachers.

## **Research Findings**

The findings are represented as contesting spaces in the understandings regarding the dual-mode RE curriculum policy change for secondary schools in Malawi based on the understandings by the Ministry of Education officials, faith-community leaders, and secondary school head teachers. The major theme emerging from the findings include conflicting ideological posturing which leads to power struggles in claiming space in the RE curriculum.

The dual mode RE curriculum policy provides for two curricular spaces: one for BK as a mono-faith syllabus and another for RME as a multi-faith syllabus. Because of the curriculum's dual-nature, educational contradictions are created with respect to ontology, epistemology, and methodology of RE in public schools.

Ontologically, the BK syllabus is mono-faith in nature, conceptualising RE as a subject based on one religion, perceived as appropriate within a given historical and socio-political context. Epistemologically, mono-faith RE promotes an exclusivist curricular space, where acquisition of knowledge and understanding of one religion is promoted. In terms of methodology, mono-faith RE employs an exclusivist approach, with closed methods of teaching and learning religion. Such methodology does not promote dialogue across difference since it does not give room to discussion of RE content from other religions.

On the other hand, the RME syllabus is multi-faith in nature. Its ontology conceptualises RE as a subject based on many religions, accepted as valid truths in their own right and space. Its epistemology, promotes a curricular space, where critical knowledge and understanding of religion as an important dimension of human and social life is cultivated. Methodologically, it adopts multi-tradition approach and its 'primary aim... is to provide students with an opportunity to learn religion by studying actual religions' (Chidester *et al.* 1994: 45). As such, it employs methods that promote open discussion of RE content drawn from many religions, thereby cultivating dialogue across difference (Marshall & Oliva 2006; Skrla & Scheurich 2004).

The claim here is that the two syllabuses making the dual-mode RE curriculum were included to meet ideological differences about RE curriculum theory and practice. Consequently, educational ambiguity was

created about the role of RE in public schools. Their inclusion also contradicted the national goals of education in Malawi.

The notion of dominant ideologies shaping national curriculum was reflected in the some of the understandings. The one faith-community leader (FC-4) acknowledged the introduction of the dual-mode RE curriculum as a product of the dominant ideologies of the time, as follows:

Moreover—may be what I can say is the whole essence of education is intended to meet a political agenda. Because education is provided, is defined by the elites. It is defined by the politburo. The package—what you call a curriculum—is defined by people who are privileged to make decisions for others. ...In fact the advantage we have now is that we are in a democratic situation where, although the key people may choose what to teach, the general public can voice their concern and reject; the way they rejected the policy of 2000 (Interview FC-4).

One head teacher (HT-16) indirectly alluded to the dominant ideologies of those who were in power at the time the dual-mode RE curriculum was introduced as follows:

It is unfortunate that after the teaching of BK in schools for many years then somebody just thought of introducing another subject which is contradicting with BK just for the sake of accommodating the unknown reasons to the Malawians (Questionnaire HT-16).

The above view was informed by the history of RE in Malawi. Since the introduction of western formal education by the missionaries from the 1870s (Banda 1982), mono-faith RE was taught in both primary and secondary school schools, based on the Bible as the scripture for Christianity (Nankwenya 1977; Salanjira 2003). Thus, multi-faith RE was understood as an unfortunate development, contradicting mono-faith RE. This can be seen as a case of ideological conflict about RE curriculum theory and practice in public schools.

One faith-community leader (FC-2) pointed out the influential position of the Christian faith-communities in determining the dual-mode RE curriculum as follows:

The Church was protesting the removal of Bible Knowledge and completely replacing it with Religious and Moral Education. So that is why they [BK and RME] were placed side by side (Interview FC-2).

Thus, the dual-mode RE curriculum policy change was partly influenced by the ideologies of the Christian faith-communities who opposed the replacement of BK with RME in schools. It was also partly influenced by the government ideology of teaching religion in schools, using a multi-faith approach and as an educational, not a religious activity (Hull 1984a). The multi-faith RE approach was also supported by the Muslim faith-community.

In addition to the mono-faith and multi-faith ideologies, confessional and non-confessional RE ideologies were reflected in some of the understandings regarding the dual-mode RE curriculum policy change. Each of these two ideologies stands for a distinctive way of conceptualising the teaching of religion in schools. The former conceptualises RE as a religious activity and the latter as an educational activity. Thus, the conflicting demands for confessional or non-confessional RE allow for the impact of ideology on RE curriculum.

For instance, some understandings emphasised the confessional view of RE, as evident in the comment by one faith-community (FC-2), which had this to say (Minutes of the first national consultative meeting 2000):

[FC-2] does not accept the pedagogical approach that only imparts knowledge without conversion. To [FC-2] conversion and teaching are complementary.

The above view illustrates a case of contestation of non-confessional RE in favour of confessional RE. With a confessional RE ideology, a multi-faith approach to the teaching and learning of religion in public schools would not be supported. This is because multi-faith RE aims at helping learners develop knowledge and understanding of religion as a social phenomenon, without

leading them to a confession of faith. By extrapolation, it can be argued that, the Christian faith-communities, apparently, understood the BK syllabus as a means for conversion among learners. As such, any pedagogical approach without conversion was not in line with their confessional RE ideology. However, although the Christian faith-communities understood BK as a means for conversion, the syllabus itself did not have that as its aim (Ministry of Education 1982a; 1982b).

The confessional RE ideology resonates with Hull's (2007) learning-religion approach which involves the situation where a single religion or faith is taught. In that approach, learners 'are expected to participate in the beliefs and practices of the religion being taught' (Hull 2007: 4). The goal is to enable the learners to come to believe in a religion or to strengthen their commitment to it (Chidester *et al.* 1994).

Another insight is that the Christian faith-communities clearly declared that their view of RE was different from that of the government. For them RE in public schools was to serve their evangelical aim of converting the learners. For the government, it was to promote knowledge of religion as an important dimension of human and social life, without privileging any religion. The following extract shows the confessional view of the Christian faith-communities (Minutes of the first national consultative meeting, 2000):

The Christian organisations also observed that the Christian Churches have invested a lot in the country all for the purpose of upholding the name of Jesus. Christian schools, as part of the Christian Church investment cannot be used for the teaching of ATR (African Traditional Religion) or Islam.

Thus, the teaching of religion in schools was largely viewed by the Christian faith-communities from a confessional perspective. By implication, BK was understood as confessional and RME as non-confessional in approach. The above extract also reveals an exclusivist attitude towards other religions in the public school curriculum.

However, not all faith-communities were informed by a confessional ideology of RE. For instance, one faith-community (FC-1) expressed a non-confessional conception of RE, as evident below (Minutes of the first national consultative meeting):

To [FC-1] schools are not intended to preach about and convert people to particular religious faith, but rather to transmit knowledge for widening the intellectual scope of children.

The above view was non-confessional and a liberal conception of RE. As an educational activity, the aim of RE should be to help learners develop critical knowledge and understanding of religion as a dimension of human and social life. It should enable learners to appreciate how religion helps some people to find meaning and purpose in life, and how religion affects the world and society in which we live (Steyn 2004).

The data also implies that not all faith-communities are informed by a confessional ideology in their conceptualisation of RE for public schools. As Steyn (2004: ix) observes, learners ‘should be able to empathise with the other ... and have some idea of what it means to be, for instance, a devout Africanist, Christian, Jew, or humanist’. From this perspective, RE can provide opportunities for learners ‘to gain educational benefit from the study of religion’ (Hull 2007: 4).

The non-confessional RE ideology resonates, to some extent, with Grimmitt’s (2000) learning-about-religion and learning-from-religion approaches. The learning-about-religion approach is descriptive and historical in nature and is against mono-faith RE. As Hull (2007: 3) observes, it

... is often motivated by the desire to create a purely educational form of religious education, one which will not be open to the charge of indoctrinating or giving an unfair advantage to any particular religion.

Another insight is that since the dual-mode RE curriculum accommodates two contradictory spaces—the mono-faith space and the multi-faith space—the mono-faith space can be described as confessional and the multi-faith space as non-confessional. Thus, although the dual-mode RE curriculum may not be charged of indoctrination, it can be criticised for giving an unfair advantage to Christianity over Islam and African Tradition Religions. This is because while Christianity is exclusively covered in the mono-faith space (BK), it also shares the multi-faith space (RME), alongside Islam and African Traditional Religions.

A case of power struggle created by ideological conflict can be noted in the findings with regard to the introduction of other faiths in the multi-faith space. The Christian faith-communities contested RME and understood it as an attempt 'to wipe away Christianity' (Questionnaire HT-15). In this case, the change from mono-faith to multi-faith RE curriculum was in conflict with the ideology of the Christian faith-communities. Their conception of RE was informed by the need to promote faith. On that basis they contested the change, turning RE curriculum into a 'battleground of many competing influences and ideologies' (Kelly 1999: 167).

In addition, some ideological views portrayed the dual-mode RE policy as a recipe for confusion. For instance, one head teacher (HT-9) observed that:

The change will bring confusion in this country. Only BK should be taught. RME suited the previous regime for the reason best known to the leaders (Questionnaire, HT-9).

Another head teacher (HT-5), commenting on the policy's divisive effect on Christians and Muslims in public schools, had this to say:

While I may not be comfortably and competently aware about the rationale of introducing this [policy], in reality it has, to some extent, polarized the schools according to faiths. Those perceived to be predominantly in Christian domains have emphasised on [BK] while those in Moslem regions opting for RME. Even teachers in these areas are inclined to these perceptions similarly (Questionnaire, HT-5).

From the data it is evident that the policy change was perceived as a liability for Malawi's education system because it had polarised schools into those that favoured BK and those that favoured RME. Such polarisation defeated government's purpose of aligning curriculum to the political vision of maintaining peace and unity among people (Harley & Wedekind 2004). It had the effect of creating religious apartheid among schools (Summers 1996).

However, since RME covers Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions, it is not correct to claim that it is for Muslims. In fact,

it is BK that privileges the Christian faith-communities, as it is only based on the Bible, as the scripture for Christianity. The Christian faith-communities' resistance of RME reflected their unwillingness to have other religions included in the school curriculum. Ideologically, such resistance could be influenced by what D' Costa (1986) describes as an exclusivist theology of other religions. In the main, this theology accepts Christianity as the only valid means of gaining salvation. As such other faiths are not accepted as valid in own right and space (Kraemer 1962).

The findings demonstrate how ideological differences created mixed reactions about the dual-mode RE curriculum conflict. For instance, commenting on differences in ideology about RE between Christian and Muslim faith communities, one Ministry of Education official (MOE-2) had this to say:

In fact it depended or it depends on where you belong to, if say for example you are a Muslim and then with the introduction of Religious and Moral Education, where the teaching of Islam was included, those people were happy. They thought probably their wishes, you know, were considered. But those that were coming from the Christian background, they thought that probably that was an attempt to convert some Christians. ...but there was misunderstanding, a lot of misunderstandings, especially from those people that did not know why the change. They thought that...the government was trying to convert people through education (Interview MOE-2).

Another official (MOE-5) at one education division concurred that there had been mixed reactions to the policy change as follows:

There are really mixed reactions from the community and hence ... the fuss that was there in the community. In fact the community even up to now is still not too sure of what really is the way forward to this new approach .... But I should believe that probably any new change is subject to be resisted up until the whole community would really understand how it was...prepared. But right now may be the problem that I can see here is that the community was not involved in

the initiation stages of this new approach. It is like we as curriculum developers just came up with the idea and developed the material. Then later on we thought of sensitising the community when the material was already there. So that's why may be this really brought ... an uproar from the society (Interview MOE-5).

A Ministry of Education official (MOE-9) suggested that,

... whenever you are bringing change there are some quarters of the society that will resist. And with this one, there is a very good percentage of people resisting it. For instance, when we had Bible Knowledge only, the Muslim students...some of them were willing to take the subject and were writing examinations. But when it came to this RME, the Christians...refuted it completely such that the candidates that write the exams, probably we can say not much- not many of them are Christians (Interview MOE-9).

It is evident that mixed reactions were created because some people understood the curriculum as a means for conversion while others understood it as an educational activity. The inclusion of Islam in the multi-faith syllabus was perceived as an attempt to convert people to Islam Yet it can be supposed that people should have been suspicious of BK because of its mono-faith approach. Probably this misunderstanding was a cover-up for hegemony by people resisting the introduction of Islam and other religions in the school curriculum. For a long time, in the history of education in Malawi, RE was based on the Christian faith. With that background, the introduction of other religions in the RE curriculum could easily be understood as an attack on the hegemony enjoyed by the Christian faith.

Another insight emerging from the data is that schools tended to prefer BK to RME. Such preference might reflect a contesting space in the dual-mode RE curriculum policy change and, therefore, politics of the school curriculum.

Commenting on the apparent contestation of the dual-mode RE curriculum policy change one Ministry of Education official (MOE-3) observed that:

Of course schools have made it open. They have made [both] subjects available. But practically, to a greater extent, most opt for Bible Knowledge for obvious reasons. I think because of their religious inclinations, most opt for Bible Knowledge. Of course there are cases here and there where you have students learning Religious and Moral Education, but they are very rare...To a greater extent, it is still Bible Knowledge which seems to be taking an upper hand (Interview MOE-3).

Another Ministry of Education official (MOE-7) also minimised the policy's value due to the apparent contestation at school level as follows:

The only visible thing is that Christian schools are choosing BK and where there are predominantly...Islamic communities they are choosing RME because of the component of Islam. So probably that can tell the reaction that the other community doesn't want their students to learn the... philosophies of the other religions. ... In secondary schools, the reaction is just choice of subjects: Christian schools choosing BK without consultation, without remorse (Interview MOE-7).

One Ministry of Education official (MOE-1) explained the cause of the policy's mixed reactions as evident below:

It is really viewed with mixed reactions. One thing for sure is that the two [BK and RME], since they are dealing with issues to do with faith and especially for the young people, the worry with the society is, if we begin offering RME which taps issues from different faiths...aren't we in one way going to convert the young ones at that level? Won't they be confused at that level to say they are learning about these things from this faith, that faith, that faith?...So the worry with society is...the young people might get confused because every faith would want its young generation to really know or learn about things from their own faith (Interview MOE-1).

There is an obvious lack of clarity about the educational value of the dual-mode RE curriculum policy change. The mixed reactions reflected lack of understanding about what the curriculum sought to achieve in terms of education. Underpinning these mixed reactions could be the conflict between ideologies about confessional and non-confessional RE; a conflict between promoting faith, on the one hand, and critical understanding of religion as an important dimension of human and social life, on the other.

Apparently, the policy was misunderstood in that BK was taken to be for Christians and RME for Muslims. To that extent, the policy had created what Summers (1996: 11) describes as ‘religious apartheid’ in schools. However, the policy only stipulated that both BK and RME should be offered in schools as optional subjects not that BK is for Christians and RME is for Muslims. One obvious point here was that the curriculum policy change was subject to various interpretations.

It was also surprising and somehow misleading that the RME syllabus was taken to be for Muslims, yet it covers the three main religious traditions of Malawi, namely, Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions (Ministry of Education, 1998). Such a misunderstanding could be due to the apparent conflict in the conception of RE. For instance, the Ministry of Education conceptualised RE as an educational activity while the Christian faith-communities conceptualised it as religious activity. In that sense the mixed reactions reflected the tension between the secular (educational) and sacred (religious) understanding of RE. One point to be noted here is that unless such ideological conflict is resolved, the dual-mode RE curriculum policy change will continue to be contested by various groups speaking at cross-purposes.

## **Conclusion**

The article examined the impact that ideology can have on curriculum theory and practice within a given historical and socio-political context. By exploring the dual-mode RE for secondary schools in Malawi, it has been demonstrated that ideologies do not only reflect the influence of dominant groups in society but also what such groups believe should be the value of education in society. One major impact of ideology on national curriculum policy is the creation of educational contradiction in an attempt to

accommodate competing ideological positions about what should be taught in schools. The dual-mode RE curriculum for secondary schools in Malawi has been discussed as a case of curriculum containing educational contradictions which arise out of ideological posturing.

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