



American Journal of Education and Technology (AJET)

ISSN: 2832-9481 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 4 ISSUE 1 (2025)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA



Exploring Environmental Education Content through Education for Sustainable Development Lenses. A Case of Malawi Senior Primary School Religious Education Curriculum

Silas Garatia Kathyole^{1*}, Baamphattha Dinama², Makotoka Kahaka²

Article Information

Received: October 01, 2024

Accepted: November 07, 2024

Published: December 21, 2024

Keywords

*Curriculum Documents,
Environment, Environmental
Content, Religious Education,
Sustainable Development*

ABSTRACT

The United Nations environmental education agenda calls all bodies of knowledge to engage students by instilling environmental consciousness and actively involve them through transformative classroom practices. Therefore, all curricula are expected to integrate considerable and relevant environmental content that is linked to Education for Sustainable Development through classroom practice. This qualitative article is part of a larger study that investigated the adequacy of environmental education content and the suggested pedagogical approaches in the Malawi senior primary school Religious Education curriculum. This was in an effort to seek deeper understanding on the adequacy of ecological and environmental content and how the content is pedagogically made accessible to learners. The investigation involved analyzing Religious Education curriculum documents and recommended textbooks with respect to ecological and environmental content, including the suggested pedagogical approaches. The study revealed the limited coverage of ecological and environmental issues especially the Bible Knowledge curricular that focus more on conservation and less on sustainability and ecological justice. Furthermore, the study revealed a dominance of transmission mode, with a focus on knowledge transmission rather than critical thinking or problem-posing with practical engagement of students. Among some of the propositions were the need for review of RE curriculum, focusing on adequacy of ecological and environmental content with the transformative pedagogical approaches and this in response to the UN urgent call on ecological and environmental education.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century made the world a global village by introducing inter-disciplinary studies and thus helped create a platform for intensive and inclusive resource-oriented research and development in various fields which include environment, education, and others (Olsson *et al.*, 2016). The United Nations adopted Agenda 21 at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 for which Malawi like other UN member states are signatories. This initiated a significant paradigm shift in the instruction on environmental education (Kachitsa & Eneya, 2009). The new approach mandates all bodies of knowledge at all levels to integrate ecological and environmental education content using the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework both at curriculum development and infusion at classroom practice and at all levels from preschool to college and university (United Nations, 2005). In response to the United Nations' call for ecological and environmental education, various countries have taken proactive steps to integrate environmental education into their schools' curricula. For instance, the Swedish National Board of Education (SNBE) appointed a special committee on environment education in schools with the task of revising the curricula to provide a basis for efficient environmental education at all school levels. This committee proposed measures for the development and

reform of teaching methods, review teacher training and investigate the need for special training for persons who are to work professionally with environmental problems (Olsson *et al.*, 2016).

In Malawi, the issue of integrating ecological and environmental education in all areas can be partly traced from way back in 1997. Informed by the objectives of Agenda 21, Malawi undertook a review of its environmental policy. As a result, Malawi made significant efforts to enhance access to environmental information and raised awareness among its citizens, thereby promoting ecological and environmental education (Government of Malawi 1997). In addition, following the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) summit held in South Africa in 2005, Malawi reviewed the environmental policies, and made several efforts to improve access to environmental information and awareness to the people. Consequently, the National Environmental Policy (NEP) was formulated (Government of Malawi, 2005). The NEP emphasized that ecological and environmental issues must be addressed at all educational levels; that is, from primary to university level. Following the United Nations' appeal to integrate ecological and environmental education, the Malawi Ministry of Education initiated a curriculum review. Consequently, the Social Studies curriculum for Standard five was reviewed to include

¹ Department of Languages & Social Sciences Education, Faculty of Education, University of Botswana & Lecturer Emmanuel University, Lilongwe Area 43, Malawi

² Department of Languages & Social Sciences Education, Faculty of Education, University of Botswana, Botswana

* Corresponding author's e-mail: s.kathyole@emmanueluniversity.ac.mw

environmental and ecological content, reflecting the country's commitment to sustainable development and environmental stewardship (Government of Malawi, 2007). It is worthy noting that at the time of this study, schools' curricular were under review and therefore this study sought to understand how the government through the Ministry of Education, including the citizens respond to the call on ecological and environmental education at all levels: policy, curriculum integration down to infusion at teaching and learning at all levels.

Problem Statement

Sustainable development (SD) is a collective global request to consider the escalating list of societal issues including biodiversity, climate change, energy, water, production and consumption patterns, human rights, human health, governance, and urbanization (Ojala, 2013). Therefore, the new understanding is that education for sustainable development is not the exclusive domain of any discipline, and that all disciplines should contribute towards addressing these societal issues through the integration of ecological and environmental content (United Nations, 1978). Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) utilizes a variety of transformational pedagogical techniques that promote participatory learning and the acquisition of high intellectual skills (Tucker, 2014). However, in developing countries like Malawi, research on ecological and environmental content in relation to transformative pedagogical knowledge particularly in Religious Education (RE) has not been given the scholarly attention it deserves despite an uptick on literature in this area elsewhere. As a result, little is known about what goes on in the RE classrooms as guided by the curriculum in terms relevance, adequacy and pedagogical approaches on ecological and environmental content hence necessitating this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the adequacy of ecological and environmental education content and how it is delivered in the Malawi senior primary school Religious Education – multi-faith and Bible Knowledge curriculum documents and textbooks. Focus was on education for sustainable Development concept and the suggested pedagogical approaches.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. How adequate and relevant is the ecological and environmental content in the Malawi senior primary school Religious Education curriculum?
2. What pedagogical approaches are suggested to deliver ecological and environmental education in Malawi senior primary school Religious Education practice?

Objectives of the Study

1. To evaluate the adequacy and relevance of the ecological and environmental content in the Malawi

senior primary school Religious Education curriculum.

2. To explore the transformative pedagogical approaches on environmental education in the Malawi senior primary school Religious Education curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

UN Call for Environmental Education

The 2005 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg, South Africa aimed to reinvigorate global efforts towards sustainable development and assess the progress made in implementing Agenda 21. Agenda 21 was the Program of Action adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992 also known as the Earth Summit. Following the 2005 WSSD summit, the United Nations decided that from 2005 until 2014 would be UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) with UNESCO as the lead agency (UNESCO, 2005).

Within the broad goals established by the General Assembly, the national sub-goal for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development focus on leveraging education, public awareness, and training to drive sustainable development. seeks to elevate the significance of education promoting sustainability (UNESCO, 2005). Among other things, the DESD aimed also to foster an increased quality of teaching and learning in education for sustainable development and help countries make progress towards and attain the millennium development goals through ESD efforts. Furthermore, through DESD, UNESCO provided countries with new opportunities to incorporate ESD into education reform efforts.

Response to UN Call on Environmental Education at International Level

The Republic of China - Taiwan, demonstrated its commitment to the call for environmental education by formulating the environmental Protection Act (EPA) in 2011 (Wang, 2010). Within its implementation program, all civil servants, K-12 schoolteachers, students and employees of the state-run businesses and statutory bodies sponsored by the government, must attend at least for hours of environmental and sustainability courses every year (RoC, 2010).

Response to UN Call on Environmental Education at Regional Level

At the regional level, SADC member states domesticated the global sustainability initiatives with focus on sustainable development, ecological and environmental issues and other socio-economic issues (Lotz-Sisitka, 2006; Lotz-Sisitka *et al.*, 2017). In Botswana for example, the Ministry of Education engaged in the implementation of environmental education as an infused phenomenon into the existing curriculum (Ketlhoilwe, 2010). This approach aligns with the objectives of Multi-Faith Religious Education as highlighted by Dinama (2010),

which leads to equip learners with Religious Knowledge and skills, encouraging harmony with nature and fostering ecological and environmental awareness and sustainability practices. In addition, Government of Botswana set up an Environmental Education Committee with a focal person at all education regions (Ketlhoilwe, 2007).

In response to the UN call, Zimbabwe took steps to integrate ecological and environmental education into its curriculum. The Revised Curriculum Framework (2015 – 2022) incorporated environmental education and sustainability concepts across subjects (Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2015). Furthermore, the Environmental Education Policy (2017) aimed to promote sustainable development, conservation, and environmental stewardship (Zimbabwe Ministry of Environment, Water and Climate, 2017). With relation to transformative approaches, the Integrated Environmental Learning Programme (IELP) launched in 2004, focused on hands-on, inquiry-based learning (Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture, 2004).

Response to UN Call on Environmental Education at Local Level

In response to the UN call, the Government of Malawi reviewed the environmental policies, and a significant milestone archived was the formulation of the National Environmental Policy (NEP) that emphasized the need for ‘multi-disciplinary approach to environmental matters. Furthermore, Malawi reviewed schools’ Social Studies syllabus for standards five to eight, the senior primary level only (Government of Malawi, 2007). However, this response fell short, as it was a review of a single subject, defeating the ‘inter-disciplinary’ inclusive approach to addressing ecological and environmental issues.

Concept of Sustainable Development

Scholars have explained sustainable development differently but with converging meaning (Ojala, 2013; Olsson *et al.*, 2016; Pellaud *et al.*, 2019). The World Commission on Sustainably (WCED, 1987), defined sustainable development as: ‘Development that meets the needs of present generation whole not compromising the ability of future generations to also meet their needs’ (p.11). Tilbury (2011) clarifies sustainability as an inclusive way, encompassing human and ecological health, social justice, secure livelihoods, and a better world for all generations. Taylor (1999) postulates that there exists a strong interdependence between economies, social and environmental dimensions, therefore formulating a distinction between the two concepts as “Sustainability” is often viewed as a long-term goal, whereas “Sustainable Development” refers to the many processes and pathways to achieve the long-term goals.

Curricula Changes on Environmental Education

The implementation of changes in curricula in each country depends, among other things, on the education

policy of the individual country, and on the degree of centralization of policy makers. In some countries like the United Kingdom, almost each headmaster can form his own curricula for his school; in Yugoslavia each state has a high degree of freedom to adapt the curricula established by the Federal Council of Education (Olsson *et al.*, 2016). whereas in the United States each state and greater cities are completely free to write curricula of their own. However, in countries like Germany and Sweden, where education is highly centralized curriculum changes can be implemented swiftly and uniformly across the nation, this enables the efficient integration of environmental education into the curriculum, reaching all schools and students simultaneously (Olsson *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, counties with centralized or individualized educational systems face greater challenges in introducing nationwide curriculum changes, including environmental education due to several reasons such as diverse regional or institutional autonomy, variability in curriculum design and implementation and potential resistance to change from local stakeholders due to lack of centralized authority.

Sub-Saharan countries, including Malawi, possess highly centralized education systems, facilitating uniform curriculum changes on ecological and environmental education nationwide. However, economic constraints and donor-driven influences often hinder the implementation and consistency of these changes. Economic challenges, such as limited resources and budget constraints, slow down curriculum reform efforts (World Bank, 2018). Additionally, donor-driven initiatives, while well intentioned, can lead to (1) Curriculum overload and fragmentation (UNESCO, 2012), (2) Shifts in focus, prioritizing donor agendas over national goals (Kemmerer & LaSota, 2016). (3) Dependence on external funding, rather than sustainable national investment (Global Partnership for Education, 2020). These factors compromise the effectiveness and sustainability of curriculum changes, including environmental education initiatives.

History of RE in Relation to Ecological and Environmental Education

Religious Education has a long history dating back to ancient civilization. Initially it focused on passing down spiritual traditions and beliefs. However, as environmental concerns grew, religious education began to incorporate ecological and environmental themes. During the pre-industrial era, religious education emphasized harmony with nature and stewardship of the earth. During the Industrial Revolution, focus shifted to human domination over nature, leading to environmental degradation. In the 1960s-1970s, ecological consciousness emerged, influencing religious education to incorporate environmental concerns. For example, religious scholars like (Taylor 2009, 2010, 2016; Gottlieb, 2006) highlighted the need for religious education to address

environmental issues. In addition, The Tbilisi Declaration (1978) emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to environmental education, stating that it “should be interdisciplinary in its approach, drawing on the specific content of each discipline to make possible a holistic and balanced perspective” (United Nations, 1978). This declaration paved the way for the incorporation of environmental education into various disciplines, including religious education.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Religious Education began to address issues of sustainability, climate change, and Eco-justice, reflecting a growing recognition of the interconnectedness of human and environmental well-being (Cathedral, 1989; Hessel, 1990). Similarly, the 20th century religious communities began re-emphasizing environmental stewardship and social justice (source??) a direct result of the UN adoption of Agenda 21 and emphasis on sustainable development and transformative pedagogy on environmental issues (United Nations, 1992).

Religious Teaching on Ecology and Environment

Religious teachings on ecological and environmental issues vary across different faiths, but many shares common themes and principles. Key teachings are on stewardship, creation care, Justice and compassion, interconnectedness and responsibility to future generations.

Stewardship

Many religions emphasize humanity’s responsibility to care for and manage the earth’s resources, recognizing God’s ownership and dominion over creation (Genesis 1:28, Psalm 24:1). On creation care, religious teachings often stress the importance of protecting and preserving the natural world, recognizing its inherent value and sacredness (Genesis 1:1, Psalm 104:24). Justice and compassion: Faiths emphasize the need for justice and compassion in relation to environmental issues, particularly for the most vulnerable populations (Isaiah 58:6-7, Matthew 25:31-46). With regards to interconnectedness, many religions teach the interconnectedness of all living beings and the earth, encouraging a holistic approach to environmental issues (Colossians 1:15-20). Simple living: Religious teachings often promote simplicity, moderation, and restraint in consumption and resource use (Matthew 6:19-21, Luke 12:15). Responsibility to future generations: Faiths emphasize the importance of considering the impact of our actions on future generations and the long-term health of the planet (Deuteronomy 30:19, 7th Generation Principle). These teachings reflect a shared concern for the well-being of creation and a recognition of humanity’s responsibility to care for the earth.

Islam emphasizes the importance of environmental stewardship and ecological balance. Some key teachings and scholars’ perspectives include Trusteeship: that humans are entrusted with protecting the Earth and its resources (Quran 2:30). In terms of conservation, Islam encourages sustainable use of resources, avoiding waste,

and preserving natural habitats (Quran 7:31). Chishti (2016) highlights the importance of environmental education in Islam.

Malawi’s traditional religions have a deep connection with nature and emphasize living in harmony with the environment. Traditional religions in Malawi view nature as sacred and interconnected with human life (Chakanza, 2000). In addition, ancestors are believed to reside in natural features, promoting conservation and respect for the environment (Schoffeleers, 2000). Traditional religions promote community-based conservation, encouraging collective responsibility for environmental stewardship (Kishindo, 2004).

Religious Education Curriculum in Malawi

In Malawi, Religious Education is a compulsory subject in public schools following a strong Christian historical foundation of education in Malawi. Both RE which is multi-faith in its approach (Christianity, Islam and Malawi Traditional Religions and Bible Knowledge which is mainly based on Christianity options are offered. The choice between the two curricular is left to the proprietors or community around the school. multi-faith Religious Education and Bible Knowledge (BK) options coexist following a compromise by the government of Malawi on the contestation of curriculum space between the Christian and Muslim communities (Matemba, 2004; Salanjila, 2009; Makuwa, 2019; Chimango, 2020; Kamija 2020; Thyolo, 2018; Mnthambala, 2020).

While the multi-faith curricular focuses on comparative religion, ethics, and values, including environmental stewardship, Bible Knowledge narrowly focuses on Christian doctrine with less emphasis on environmental matters. However, the dual mode has sparked controversy among Christian and Muslim communities, with some arguing that BK promotes Christianity over other religions, while RE caters for all the major religions in Malawi, without elevating a particular religion.

Primary Education in Malawi

The primary education system in Malawi is a crucial foundation for the country’s education framework. The duration of primary education is eight (8) years from standard 1 – 8) with the age range of 6 – 14 years. Key curriculum subjects include Chichewa (local official language) English, Mathematics, Primary Science, Social Studies, and Religious Education. Additional subjects include Art, Music, Physical Education and Life Skills. The structure is such that standard 1-2 are infant, 3 – 4 are lower primary, standard 5-6 are upper primary and standard 7 – 8 are senior primary. National examinations are at the end of standard 8 called Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination (PSLCE).

Administratively, Malawi’s current national educational system is divided into six administrative areas called education divisions. These are namely, North Education Division (NED), Central East Education Division

(CEED), Central West Education Division (CWED), South East Education Division (SEED), South West Education Division (SEED), and Shire Highlands Education Division (SHED). The education divisions are responsible for, among other things, coordinating and monitoring the implementation of education policies in Malawi (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Concept of Transformative Pedagogy

Transformative pedagogy, as rooted in critical pedagogy, is deeply connected to Education for Sustainable Development. Paulo Freire's work (1968) is foundational on transformative pedagogy, emphasizing critical consciousness, dialogue, and empowerment as opposed to the 'banking system' pedagogical approach. Freire's dialogical approach encourages collaborative learning, promoting collective action for sustainability. Education for suitable development aims to emancipate individuals and community from unsustainable practices. Similarly, Bell (1994) explores the intersection of race, gender, and culture in education, advocating for a transformative pedagogy that challenge dominant norms. Furthermore, McLaren (1998) comments on the commodification of education and advocates for a transformative pedagogy that prioritizes social justice and critical consciousness. Kincheloe (2005) provides a comprehensive overview of critical pedagogy by emphasizing the need for transformative education that challenges dominant power structures. Giroux (1999) criticizes the cultural politics of education and advocates for and emphasizing student empowerment and critical thinking. Brookfield (2011) provides practical strategies for transformative pedagogy, emphasizing critical thinking and problem-solving education.

The literature on transformative pedagogy reveals a forceful approach to education that prioritizes social justice, critical consciousness, and student empowerment. By challenging dominant norms and structures, transformative pedagogy offers a leeway to more democratic and inclusive learning environments. Through the work of Freire, Hooks, McLaren, and others, they reveal the potential for education to be a liberator force, rather than a tool of oppression. Educators are called to embrace this vision and work towards creating classrooms that foster critical thinking, dialogue, and collaborative action. By doing so, educators can cultivate a new generation of critically conscious citizens, equipped to challenge the status quo and build a more just and democratic society. Ultimately, transformative pedagogy reminds educators that education is not merely classroom exercise, but a political and ethical act with the potential to transform individuals, communities, and the world.

The literature on transformative pedagogy reveals a forceful approach to education that prioritizes social justice, critical consciousness, and student empowerment. By challenging dominant norms and structures, transformative pedagogy offers a leeway to

more democratic and inclusive learning environments. Through the work of Freire, Hooks, McLaren, and others, they reveal the potential for education to be a liberator force, rather than a tool of oppression. Educators are called to embrace this vision and work towards creating classrooms that foster critical thinking, dialogue, and collaborative action. By doing so, educators can cultivate a new generation of critically conscious citizens, equipped to challenge the status quo and build a more just and democratic society. Ultimately, transformative pedagogy reminds educators that education is not merely classroom exercise, but a political and ethical act with the potential to transform individuals, communities, and the world.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

This study is anchored on the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Framework (UNESCO 2014). The choice for ESD framework is informed by several factors including: integrating sustainability into education, Sustainability is a concept that permeate into all spheres of human engagement with the environment. In addition, ESD framework promotes critical thinking and problem solving among not only learners but also seasoned education practitioners. The ESD framework encourages participatory learning, a current trend in learner-centered methodologies. Eventually, ESD framework fosters global citizenship, of which this study focused also on the UN call to education for sustainable development at international and local levels with a global perspective.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methodology is viewed as "the rationale and the philosophical assumptions underlying a particular study" (Wisker, 2008). This research is a qualitative study based on document analysis. The Researcher analyzed the following documents for relevancy and adequacy of ecological and environmental education content: Bible Knowledge syllabus, Selected Schemes of work and Lesson plans for Bible Knowledge and RE and Strides in BK textbooks. This researcher chose the content analysis method because the main interest was the meaning of the content and gaining an understanding of the general impression of environmental issues created by the curriculum document and the prescribed textbooks. The researcher focused on the upper and senior classes from Standard five to eight because these are the classes which are expected to integrate more content on ecological and environmental education.

This researcher began the analysis process with a conventional content analysis technique with no pre-determined expectations of the outcome. This was justifiable because there is little previous literature on the research problem of this study that is, ecological and environmental issues in Religious Education. The Researcher read through the data carefully several times, extracting sections discussing nature and environmental issues. The researcher did the first coding inductively,

deriving the coding categories from the data and at the same time looking for similarities and differences. Of the three main types of documents that researchers use, this particular researcher used public records and physical evidence (O’Leary 2014). As postulated by Bowen, (2009), the researcher observed the issue of bias and subjectivity in document analysis. Bias is in both in the author or creator of the document, and the researcher as well. The researcher considered the subjectivity of the author and the personal biases he or she may be bringing to the research. In this study, the researcher analyzed curriculum documents whose authors are drawn from a wide array of experts across the country and this aspect minimized bias (Bowen, 2009). O’Leary (2009) second major issue is the latent content of the document. Latent content refers to the style, tone, agenda, facts or opinions that exist in the document. This is a key first step that the researcher must keep in mind (O’Leary, 2014). Bowen, (2009) adds that documents should be assessed for their completeness in other words, how selective or comprehensive their data is. Furthermore, content analysis is used as a “first-pass document review” that can provide the researcher a means of identifying meaningful and relevant passages.

Data Collection Tools

This research used curriculum documents on education developed at the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE), in Domasi - Zomba Malawi and these are made available in all primary schools in Malawi. The MIE is mandated by the Ministry of education through an Act of parliament to develop and to make available in schools all curriculum issues from primary, secondary to teacher training colleges. The researcher used two primary schools where to collect data through document analysis. The two schools, (pseudonyms); Conmara and St Gina, a public and a Grant – Aided respectively, were selected based on convenience, they are within the researcher’s vicinity for cost effectiveness. For ethical considerations and protection of schools, the researcher used pseudonyms. Preceding document analysis the Researcher ensured a systematic and rigorous approach (Bowen, 2009). The researcher initially defined the objectives and articulated clear research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The Researcher further identified key concepts and themes, and guided the selection of relevant documents (Hart, 2018). This study analyzed the following curriculum documents: Bible Knowledge (BK) and Religious and Moral Studies (RMS) syllabuses, BK and RMS textbooks for standard five to eight. Selected Schemes and Records of work and lesson plans from teachers. Having selected these documents, the researcher communicated with the school heads to inform and prepare the teachers for standard five to eight in advance for their consent and preparation of the meeting and putting together the documents that the researcher had asked for (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; O’Leary, 2014).

The Researcher developed a system for categorizing, labeling and storing documents creating a document inventory (Guest *et al.*, 2021). Coding and categorization involved developing a scheme and framework, identifying themes and concepts, and key words (Saldana, 2016). Ethical considerations such as copyrights were addressed by proper citation despite being public documents. Eventually, the Researcher established a timeline to guide duration for analyzing the documents in the schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed at exploring how the Malawi senior primary school Religious Education curriculum responded to the United Nations call to environmental education through Education for Sustainable Development. Furthermore, the study sought to investigate the transformative pedagogical approaches on environmental education in Malawi senior primary school Religious Education curriculum. Therefore, the analysis focused on the adequacy and relevance of ecological and environmental content in the curriculum through the lenses of education for sustainable Development (ESD). There were various issues that emerged from the curriculum documents relating to RE in Malawi upper and senior primary school. The study collected and organized for analysis the curriculum documents, namely:

- Bible Knowledge (BK) syllabuses for standards 5 – 8.
- Religious Education – Multi-faith. (REMF) syllabuses for standards 5 – 8.
- BK textbooks for standards 5 – 8.
- RE-multi-faith textbooks for standard 5 - 8.
- Schemes and Records of work from RE teachers
- Lesson plans from teachers RE teachers

Religious Education Curriculum Options in the Malawi Primary Schools

Matemba (2008) conducted a survey that sought to find out which of the two syllabuses schools had selected for their curriculum and why. It also inquired on what problems schools faced in offering either of the syllabuses. The survey engaged 31 schools located in various districts in the three administrative regions of the country (Southern, Central and Northern), (Matemba, 2008). The survey comprised, 20 public, six grant-aided, four independent faith and one private.

Results of the survey revealed that most schools representing 87.1% had Bible Knowledge compared to a few representing 12.9% which had Religious and Moral Education (RME) on their curriculum. None of the school surveyed offered both Bible knowledge and Religious and Moral Education (Matemba, 2008). The survey surmised that most schools both primary and secondary, public, grant-aided or private prefer to have Bible Knowledge and not Religious and Moral Education Figure 1 is one of the two options for RE curriculum in the Malawi primary schools. The curriculum is mono-faith, purely Christian and Bible based.

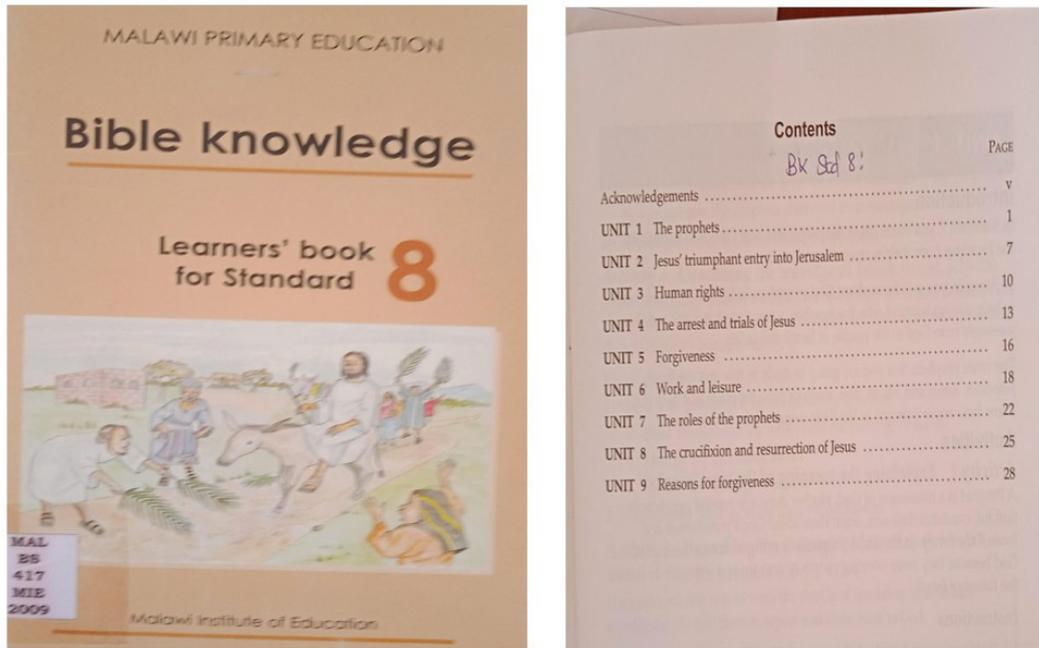


Figure 1: Bible Knowledge curriculum

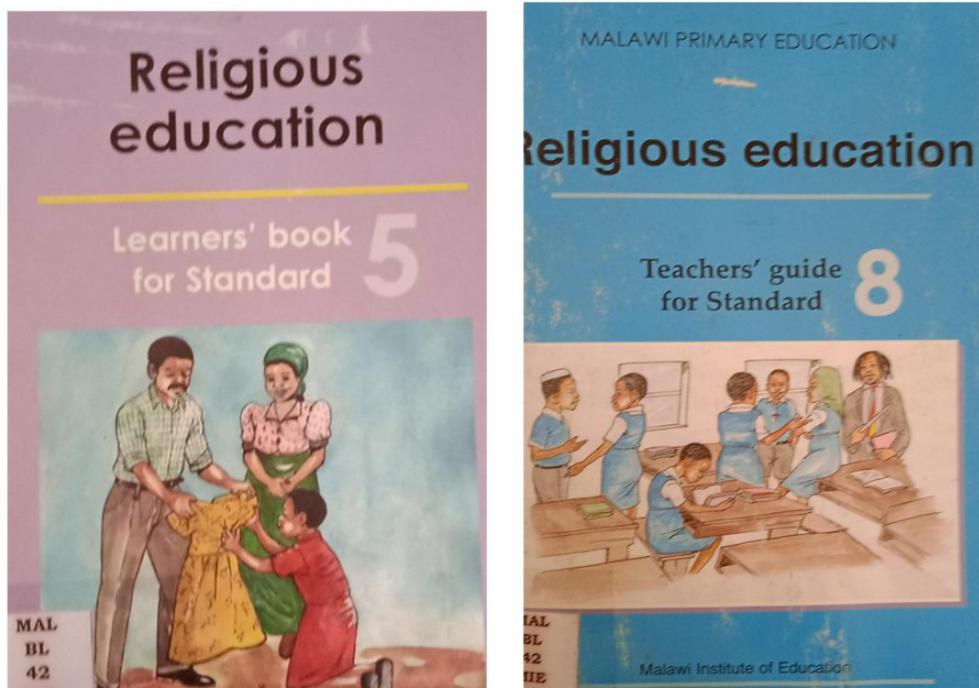


Figure 2: Religious Education curriculum

The table of contents for RE standard 6 clearly shows that environmental education content is featured in Unit 6: Composition of the environment, Unit 7: Religious teaching on environment and Unit 13: Contributions of different religions on the environment.

The researcher read through the documents to familiarize himself to the documents and understand the content, structure and language used and suggested pedagogical approaches. For both Teachers Guides and Learners books, the researcher scanned the contents pages to isolate units that are ecological and environmental in nature. In the process, the researcher also isolated few

more other units in which ecological and environmental education content can be easily infused, depending on the creativity of the teacher. Both of these categories of units were read through to understand the content, relevancy and adequacy.

The Researcher developed a coding framework based on ESD principles, ecological and environmental concepts such as:

- Stewardship, Creation care, Sustainability, Environmental justice, Climate change, Biodiversity, Responsible Resource Management, Compassion for Creation
- Biblical values for Environmental stewardship

Contents		PAGE
RE-std 6 TG		
Acknowledgements		vii
Introduction		ix
About this book		xi
Organisation of units in this book		xiii
UNIT 1 Rituals in different religions		1
UNIT 2 The similarities of rituals in different religions		5
UNIT 3 Names and beliefs of religions in Malawi		8
UNIT 4 The importance of religious beliefs		11
UNIT 5 The origins of religions in Malawi		15
UNIT 6 The composition of the environment		20
UNIT 7 Religious teachings on the environment		23
UNIT 8 Sources and sites of rituals in different religions		28
UNIT 9 The value of rituals in different religions		32
UNIT 10 Virtues and vices		36
UNIT 11 Religious views on virtues and vices		40
UNIT 12 Ways of promoting virtues		43
UNIT 13 Contributions of different religions to the environment		46
UNIT 14 Religious founders		50
UNIT 15 Religious leaders		53
UNIT 16 Stories on virtues from different religions		56
UNIT 17 The value of virtues		59

Figure 3: Education curriculum

The Researcher assigned codes to the themes and concepts in the documents using a systematic and consistent approach. The coded data were analyzed by identifying patterns, themes, and gaps in the ecological and environmental content. The analysis was done by examining frequency and emphasis on ESD concepts, integration with Religious Studies and Bible Knowledge. The Researcher also analyzed the documents for relevance to Malawian context and sustainable development goals and the adequacy of coverage and depth.

Analysis of Pedagogical Approaches

The Researcher analyzed pedagogical approaches suggested in the Standards 5-8 RE multifaith curriculum documents particularly the syllabuses. The suggested approaches in the Teachers guides and learners book activities sections and syllabuses include Storytelling, Visual aids, interactive games, Reflection and discussion, Case studies, Group work, Role-playing, Service learning, Critical thinking, Debates, Guest speakers, Field trips, Collaborative learning,

The Researcher Did a Strengths and Weaknesses Analysis, and Came out That the Weaknesses Outweigh the Strengths

Pedagogical Strengths

The researcher identified the following strengths that included

- 1) Suggestion of a variety of approaches to engage students,
- 2) Emphasis on interactive learning such as group work and experiential learning,
- 3) Encouragement of critical thinking and reflection.

Pedagogical Weaknesses

On the contrary, the Researcher identified pedagogical

weaknesses that included; overemphasis on lectures and discussions (Standards 5-6), limited use of technology integration (Standards 5-7), with insufficient opportunities for student-led learning and autonomy (Standards 5-7), (4) Lack of clear assessment and feedback mechanisms (Standards 5-8), (5), Limited attention to diverse learning styles and needs (Standards 5-8), (6) Over-reliance on traditional teaching methods (Standards 5-6), (7) Inadequate provision for differentiated instruction (Standards 5-8). Limited opportunities for student reflection and self-assessment (Standards 5-7).

The Researcher compared the findings across the different documents, syllabuses and textbooks, also noting similarities and differences between Bible Knowledge and RE-multifaith Religious Education with respect to suggested pedagogical approaches, adequacy of ecological and environmental education content.

Pedagogical Similarities

Based on the suggested pedagogical approaches in both BK and RE-multifaith curriculum documents, the researcher noted the following similarities:

- 1) Emphasis on values-based education,
- 2) Use of storytelling and narratives,
- 3) Community engagement and service,
4. Integrative approach, that is combining subjects, and
- 5) Focus on moral and ethical decision-making (Ministry of Education, 2014)

Pedagogical Differences

The Researcher also noted differences in suggested pedagogical approaches as follows:

The RE-multifaith curriculum; (1) puts more emphasis on spiritual and moral development, and focusing on religious teachings and scriptural references, (3) the curriculum

document encourages personal reflection and devotion, and (4) uses more theoretical and conceptual approaches.

Bible Knowledge

1. Stronger focus on biblical teachings and scriptures,
2. Emphasizes biblical application to daily life,
3. Uses more didactic and instructional approaches,
4. Focuses on knowledge acquisition and recall.

Weaknesses

Based on the curriculum documents for both RE and BK curricula, the Researcher noted weaknesses between the two curricula worth noting.

Religious Education- Multi-Faith

The analysis exposed gaps in the RE multi-faith curriculum. The curriculum is limited in practical applications, with overemphasis on theory. In addition, the curriculum does not demonstrate clearly the assessment strategies. Malawi adopted the Outcome Based Education (OBE) system in its primary school curriculum in 2001, marking a shift from objective based to outcome-based curriculum framework (MOE & MIE, 2007). A critical element in this OBE reform is the integration of continuous assessment (CA) which has been underscored as integral element in teaching and learning process.

The results of the longitudinal study by Improving Education Quality (IEQ) project in Malawi primary school revealed that the majority of learners were unable to read, write or perform simple mathematical tasks. In the year 2000, a team of IEQ project members started meeting education officials in Malawi to devise classroom-based intervention in order to improve the teaching and learning process. This led to the launch of CA feasibility study in 21 primary schools of Ntcheu district in 2002 (MoEST, 2008). This therefore meant that all learning areas core or optional and RE inclusive, teachers must assess learners not as 'testing the learners' but rather for assessing learning. This was a departure from the way assessment was perceived in traditional education. Further, it was observed that teachers used CA to inform their teaching.

Bible Knowledge

Lack of Environmental Focus

The curriculum primarily focuses on Biblical content, neglecting environmental issues and tier biblical connections (Kinsler & Kinssler, 2010). On the other hand, Bible knowledge curriculum overemphasis on rote memorization, without emphasis on critical thinking and reflection. The analysis further exposed inadequacy in connection to real-life issues with much emphasis on teacher-centered approach.

Insufficient Integration

Environmental themes are not explicitly integrated into biblical teachings, missing opportunities for holistic understating (DeWitt, 2011).

Less Stewardship Emphasis

Much as the curriculum touches on stewardship, it lacks depth and application to contemporary environmental concerns. The curriculum does not explicitly integrate Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) principles. Furthermore, the curriculum does not explicitly integrate Education for Sustainable Development. Principles. Is hinders effective environmental education (UNESCO, 2014).

In a different context, efficient instructional models, such as the literacy program outlined by Sawyer *et al.* (2021), have demonstrated the potential to accelerate academic growth while providing opportunities to address broader educational goals. In their study, a combination of Precision Teaching (PT), Direct Instruction (DI), and Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) resulted in significant academic gains (16 percentile points in just 6 hours) for students in a Title-1 elementary school. This efficiency not only facilitates the recovery of learning losses due to the pandemic but also allows for the integration of additional, crucial content—such as climate change education.

Similarly, in the context of Malawi's primary school Religious Education (RE) curriculum, there is potential to implement efficient instructional methods to integrate ecological and environmental education. By doing so, RE classes could address pressing environmental issues, fostering an awareness of sustainability and ecological preservation alongside religious teachings. The dual-mode curriculum approach, which blends both traditional and modern pedagogues, offers an opportunity to enhance ecological and environmental education while remaining relevant to the cultural and religious context of Malawi. Effective instructional strategies informed by behavioral science could help educators efficiently deliver both academic content and environmental education, contributing to the holistic development of students in this critical area.

Shared Weaknesses

It is worthy noting that the two RE curricula share weaknesses. The Researcher was interested to make this analysis because both are examinable options and are taught in both private and public schools in Malawi. The analysis therefore exposed inadequacy in terms of integration of ecological and environmental education, and this is the area emphasized in all UN declarations conferences on sustainable development. The study noted limited use of innovative and interactive teaching methods, another UN emphasized aspect towards use of transformative pedagogical approaches.

Ecological and Environmental Content Analysis

The Researcher analyzed both BK and RE in terms of ecological and environmental content. Particular attention was given to relevancy and adequacy.

Similarities

Based on suggested content, the Researcher noted striking

similarities in both RE curricula as follows: (1) Emphasis on creation care and stewardship (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2018a; Malawi Ministry of Education, 2018b), (2) Reference to biblical and religious teachings on environmental responsibility (RE Textbook, 2020; BK Textbook, 2020), (3) Mention of human responsibility towards the environment (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2018a; Malawi Ministry of Education, 2018b), (4) Inclusion of environmental themes like conservation and sustainability (RE Textbook, 2020; BK Textbook, 2020) and lastly, 5) Use of biblical and other religious stories and examples to illustrate environmental lessons (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2018a; Malawi Ministry of Education, 2018b)

Differences in Ecological and Environmental Content Religious Education (RE) Multi Faith Curriculum

The analysis revealed that the Religious Education – multi faith curriculum has a broader focus on ecological and environmental issues (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2018a) that includes topics like climate change, biodiversity, and eco-justice (RE Textbook, 2020). The curriculum further emphasizes the interconnections of human and environmental well-being (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2018a). Furthermore, the curriculum encourages critical thinking and reflection on environmental issues (RE Textbook, 2020). Since it is multi faith curriculum, it therefore, incorporates diverse religious perspectives on environmental stewardship (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2018a).

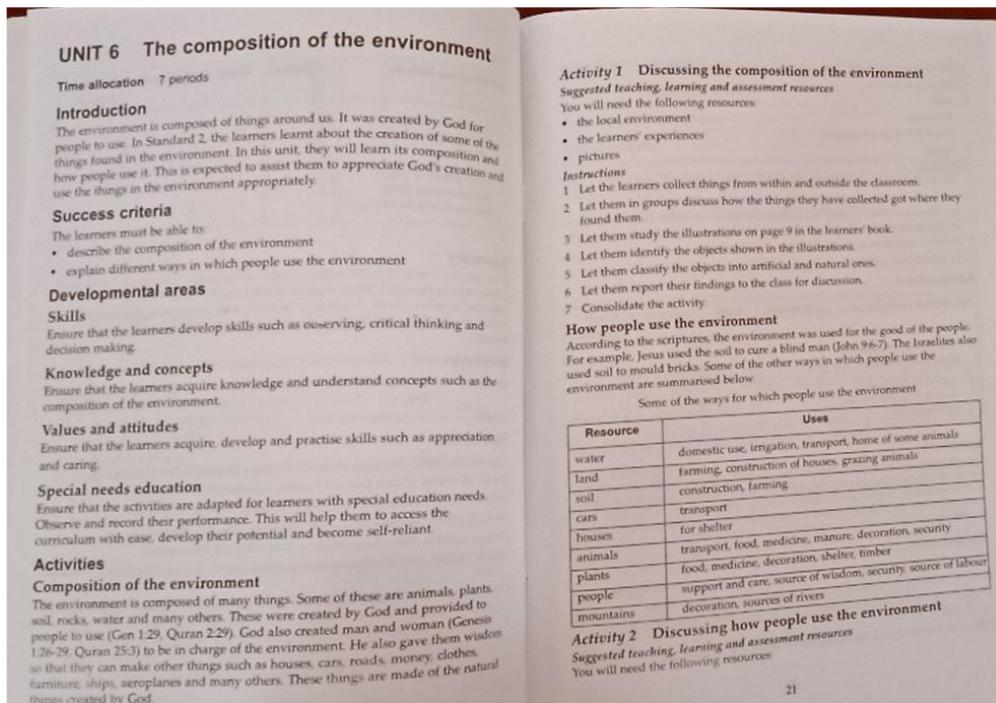


Figure 4: Religious Education- Multi-faith

Contents		PAGE
Acknowledgements	BK Std 8	v
UNIT 1 The prophets		1
UNIT 2 Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem		7
UNIT 3 Human rights		10
UNIT 4 The arrest and trials of Jesus		13
UNIT 5 Forgiveness		16
UNIT 6 Work and leisure		18
UNIT 7 The roles of the prophets		22
UNIT 8 The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus		25
UNIT 9 Reasons for forgiveness		28

Figure 5: Bible Knowledge (BK) Standard 8 pp 2 table of contents

Table of contents for Bible Knowledge textbook, learners' book shows no content or unit on ecological and environmental education for the whole year.

Bible Knowledge (BK) Curriculum

The analysis revealed that the BK curriculum has a narrower focus on biblical teachings related to environment (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2018b). The analysis further revealed that the BK curriculum primarily concentrates on biblical accounts of creation, stewardship, and dominion (BK Textbook, 2020).

However, the curriculum, particularly textbooks for Standard five emphasizes human responsibility towards creation based on biblical mandates (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2018b). The analysis further revealed a limited coverage of contemporary environmental issues (BK Textbook, 2020). Much focus of the BK curriculum documents is on biblical knowledge and application rather than critical thinking (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2018b)

Ecological and Environmental Issues

In the comparison analysis of both BK and RE-multi-faith, the Researcher noted that there is inadequate coverage of environmental issues, with a focus on conservation rather than sustainability and ecological justice. Furthermore, there is no explicit mention of climate change, biodiversity, or environmental stewardship, which is key to environmental education.

In addition, the Researcher noted lack of emphasis on the interconnectedness of human and non-human creation. This should have come out explicitly given that in both RE curricular in the Malawi Primary education, there are creation stories that show connectedness of both human and non-human. The Researcher noted through the comparison analysis that the BK curriculum documents and texts fail to integrate ecological and environmental issues, resulting in a lack of preparation for students to address contemporary environmental challenges.

Pedagogical Aspect of the Two Curricula

There is limited attention to transformative pedagogues, hindering the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and social responsibility. Overemphasis on rote memorization rather than contextualization and application of biblical teachings. There is lack of diversity and inclusivity in both BK and RE multi-faith curriculum, neglecting the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups. The implication in this situation is lack of students' involvement. There has been an increase in worries regarding the decreasing levels of student engagement in the recent years (Fredrics *et al.*, 2019). Insufficient student engagement not only impacts students' learning experience but also has lasting effects on their educational achievements, attitude towards environmental issues and future success. (Quines & Relacion, 2022). Therefore, the RE curriculum should integrate pedagogical approaches that are learner-centered.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that the Malawi senior primary school Religious Education curriculum has gaps in adequately addressing ecological and environmental education. The analysis of the curriculum and textbooks showed a limited emphasis on environmental stewardship, sustainability, and eco-justice, with a focus instead on religious dogma and doctrine. The curricular fail to integrate ecological and environmental issues, resulting in a lack of preparation for students to address contemporary environmental challenges. There is limited attention to transformative pedagogues, hindering the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and social responsibility. Over-emphasis on rote memorization rather than contextualization and application of biblical teachings.

There is lack of diversity and inclusivity in the curriculum, neglecting the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups.

The findings suggest a missed opportunity to shape young minds and foster a culture of environmental responsibility through Bible Knowledge and Religious Studies. To address this, the researcher recommends a comprehensive review and revision of the Religious Education curriculum to integrate ecological and environmental education, emphasizing practical applications and critical thinking skills. By doing so, Malawi can empower its future generations to address the pressing environmental challenges facing the country and the world. The study's findings have implications for curriculum development, teacher training, and educational policy, highlighting the need for a more holistic approach to education that prioritizes the well-being of both people and the planet.

Climate change impacts are increasingly felt across the globe, and no region is immune to its effects on education. Events such as flooding, wildfires, droughts, cyclonic storms, disease outbreaks, food shortages, rising sea levels, and extreme weather conditions like heavy snowfall can disrupt learning environments and educational systems. These challenges have been linked to human-induced climate change, highlighting the urgent need for climate resilience in education systems worldwide (Lagman, & Aguilar-Ong, 2024)) Therefore the Malawi Primary school Religious Education curricular should also not include environmental education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis of curriculum documents: syllabuses, schemes and lesson plans, RE multi-faith and BK texts, this study makes the following recommendations to different stakeholders. To curriculum developers especially for Bible Knowledge and Religious Education – multi-faith to consider adequate integration of ecological and environmental issues to demonstrate response to the United Nations call on integration of ecological and environmental education content in curricula. Bilodeau, *et al.* (2014) emphasized on the need for Both RE curricula to emphasize sustainability, justice, and stewardship. Furthermore, both curricula to adopt transformative

pedagogues, prioritizing critical thinking, problem posing and student-centered learning. Incorporate diverse perspectives and experiences, promoting inclusivity and social justice. Emphasize contextualization and application of religious teachings, encouraging critical consciousness and empowerment. By addressing these shortfalls, the curriculum can better prepare students to engage with the complex ecological and environmental challenges facing Malawi and the world.

REFERENCES

- Berling, J. A. (2004). *Understanding other world religions: A guide for inter-religious education*. Oris Books.
- Botswana Government. (1996). *The junior secondary Religious Education syllabus*. Ministry of Education. Government Printers.
- Botswana Government. (2010). *The senior secondary Religious Education syllabus*. Ministry of Education. Government Printers.
- Boon, H. (2010). Climate change? Who knows? A comparison of secondary students and pre-service teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(1), 104–120. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2010v35n1.7>
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Cathedral, T. A. (1989). Christian education and the environmental crisis. *Religious Education*, 84(3), 351–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408890840304>
- Cebelleros, A. G. (2024). Learning environment and teacher communication behavior as determinants of student engagement. *American Journal of Education and Technology*, 3(4), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.54536/ajet.v3i4.3543>
- Chakanza, J. C. (2000). Indigenous knowledge and practices in Malawi. *Journal of Indigenous Studies*, 1(1), 123–135.
- Chidester, E. (2019). Religious education in Malawian schools: A comparative study of RE and BK. *Journal of Religious Education*, 117(3), 342–355. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-019-00081-3>
- Chimango, F. (2020). The dual mode of religious education in Malawi: A critical analysis. *International Journal of Religious Education*, 12(1), 1–12.
- Chiwaka, E. (2019). Teacher training and environmental education in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 50(1), 34–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2019.1571378>
- Chishti, M. (2016). Environmental education in Islamic perspective. *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, 6(1), 55–66.
- Cobbs, J. B. (1972). *Is it too late? A theology of ecology*. Bruce Publishing Company.
- Dinama, B. (2010). Implementing a multi-faith Religious Education curriculum in Botswana junior secondary schools. *Perspectives in Education*, 28(1), 16–23.
- Freire, P. (1968). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury Press.
- Gottlieb, R. (2006). *A greener faith: Religious environmentalism and our planet's future*. Oxford University Press.
- Grim, J. (2014). The worldview of Christian ecology. *Journal of Religion and Ecology*, 1(1), 1–15.
- Fredricks, J. A., Reschly, A. L., & Christenson, S. L. (Eds.). (2019). *Handbook of student engagement interventions: Working with disengaged students*. Academic Press.
- Hessel, D. T. (1990). *After nature's revolt: Eco-justice and theological education*. Fortress Press.
- Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2022). *Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability (Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC))*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009325844>
- Kachitsa, E. and Ngalande, E. (2009). Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable Development. *A Training Manual for Teacher Educators*. Malawi Institute of Education.
- Kamija, C. (2020). Malawi's dual mode of religious education: A review of policy and practice. *Journal of Education and Human Development*, 9(1), 1–9.
- Khalid, F. (2002). Islam and the environment: A framework for inquiry. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 13(2), 141–156. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/13.2.141>
- Kishindo, P. (2004). Community-based natural resource management in Malawi. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 72(2), 145–153. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2004.04.012>
- Lagman, J. D., & Aguilar-Ong, M. (2024). The Balakat Tree Project: A case study on higher education institutions' role in climate change mitigation and environmental sustainability. *American Journal of Environment and Climate*, 3(3), 39-43 <https://doi.org/10.54536/ajec.v3i3.3036>
- Makuwa, J. (2019). Religious pluralism and education in Malawi: The dual mode approach. *Journal of Religious Pluralism*, 8(2), 123–138. <https://doi.org/10.16995/jrp.623>
- Malawi Ministry of Education. (2018a). *Religious Education syllabus*. Malawi Ministry of Education.
- Malawi Ministry of Education. (2018b). *Bible Knowledge syllabus*. Malawi Ministry of Education.
- Malawi Ministry of Education. (2020). *Religious Education textbook*. Publisher.
- Mavhunga, P. (2018). Environmental education in Zimbabwean schools: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Sustainable Development*, 11(2), 123–135. <https://doi.org/10.5539/jsd.v11n2p123>
- McFague, S. (1987). *Models of God: Theology for an ecological nuclear age*. Fortress Press.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- MOE and MIE. (2007). *Primary curriculum and assessment reform, Journeys through PCAR (6) Standard 2 Teachers' Orientation Manual*. MIE.
- MOE and MIE. (2009). *Primary curriculum and assessment*

- reform, *Journeys through PCAR (12) Standard 8 Teachers' Orientation Manual*. MIE.
- MoEST. (2014). *Orientation manual for junior secondary school curriculum: Generic issues*. MoEST.
- MoEST. (2019). *The 2018/19 Education Sector Performance Report: Strengthening education management and accountability to improve learning outcomes for all*. MoEST.
- MoEST. (2008). *Training manual for PCAR materials for IPITE trainee teachers*. DTED.
- McLaren, P. (1998). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman.
- Mnthambala, F. (2020). Religious education in Malawi: A critical review of the dual mode approach. *Journal of Critical Religious Education*, 1(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.14456/jcre.2020.1>
- Moyo, G. (2018). The dual mode of religious education in Malawi: A study of its effectiveness. *Journal of Religious Education and Values*, 39(2), 123–135. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43873-018-0011-0>
- Quines, L. A., & Relacion, M. C. D. (2022). The mediating effect of school climate on the relationship between teacher communication behavior and student engagement. *European Journal of Education Studies*, 9(11), Article 4521. <https://doi.org/10.46827/ejes.v9i11.4521>
- Sawyer, R. K., et al. (2021). Efficient literacy instruction for academic growth: A model integrating Precision Teaching, Direct Instruction, and Curriculum-Based Measurement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 113(2), 234–245. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000471>
- Schoffeleers, J. M. (2000). *Religion and the dramatization of life: Essays on the anthropology of religion*. Peter Lang Publishing.
- Silverman, D. (2016). *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Taylor, B. (2009). *Dark green religion: Nature spirituality and planetary future*. University of California Press.
- Taylor, B. (2010). Avatar and nature spirituality. *Journal of Religion, Nature and Culture*, 4(1), 95–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607670903502204>
- Tucker, M. E. (2014). *Ecological awareness: Exploring religion, ethics, and the environment*. Routledge.
- Thyolo, J. (2018). The impact of the dual mode on religious education in Malawi. *Journal of Education and Society*, 6(1), 1–10.
- United Nations. (1978). *The Tbilisi Declaration: International Conference on Environmental Education*. Tbilisi, USSR.
- White, L. (1967). The historical roots of our ecological crisis. *Science*, 155(3767), 1203–1207. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>
- Wisker, G. (2008). *The postgraduate research handbook* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture. (2004). *Integrated Environmental Learning Programme (IELP) framework*.
- Zimbabwe Ministry of Environment, Water and Climate. (2017). *Environmental education policy*.
- Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. (2015). *Revised Curriculum Framework (2015-2022)*.