

The Influence of Religious Education in the Moral Development of Learners: A Case of Selected Schools in Zambia

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Abstract

Zambia is historically undergoing a phase when Religious Education in schools is receiving renewed consideration. Largely, this development has been prompted by the view that Religious Education enables pupils to develop morally, and effect is particularly desirable since it is in conformity with national values that have been enshrined in the country's Constitution. Religious Education is indeed meant to enable pupils gain the knowledge, understanding and skills needed to handle questions raised by religious beliefs as well as to help them develop ethically. However, despite Religious Education being implemented in secondary schools in Zambia, there are prevalent moral challenges that still affect the learners. This article sheds light on this discrepancy by focusing on the experience of two secondary schools. In this respect, it is informed by the findings of a largely qualitative study that was undertaken. In its analysis of this data and relevant literature, the article concludes that Religious Education plays a vital role in the moral development of learners, notwithstanding some of their wrongdoings. However, this role can only be enhanced through regular reviews of the curriculum, a process that should foster incorporation of the views of key stakeholders.

Keywords

Zambia, Religious Education, Curriculum, Moral Development, Secondary Schools

1.0 Introduction

There has been a revival of interest in Religious Education (hereinafter RE) in Zambia. Largely, this development has been occasioned by the view that RE enables pupils to develop morally. Having ethically well-formed pupils is not only

desirable for society, but is also in conformity with national values that have been embedded in the country's Constitution. At any rate, as asserted in Sandwell, the primary aim of RE "is to explore what people believe and what difference this makes to how they live, so that pupils can gain the knowledge, understanding and skills needed to

handle questions raised by religion and belief, reflecting on their own ideas and ways of living” (https://www.sandwell.gov.uk/info/200295/school_and_learning). Similarly, the document of the Ministry of General Education, entitled ‘Educating Our Future’ (1996), a national policy on education in the Republic of Zambia, declared that the school is a leading agency in helping the young people to form socially acceptable habits and values. In this way, the Ministry underscored the central importance of education in fostering the development of moral values and attitudes through RE. However, despite this deliberate effort to assert the impact of RE among the learners, just like in other countries, social disorders and moral transgressions are prevalent among learners and those who have undergone secondary school education system (Ndarwa 2007).

This article, therefore, attempts to contribute to the discourse around the dissonance between the investment in RE and the moral development of the learners, both during their time at school and in subsequent life as adults. In doing so, it draws upon the findings of a study that was conducted in Zambia in order to assess the role that RE served in the moral development of pupils in secondary schools. Besides, it makes recourse to the theoretical body of literature on this subject matter.

2.0 Theoretical Context

It must be understood, from the outset, that RE is a term that is generally referred to the kind of education that revolves around religion. It may occur in ordinary daily life of societies. It may also be taught as a subject in contexts such as churches, religious organization and schools. For our purpose here, the latter constitutes the circumstances in which the discussion of this article has been developed.

With this background, it is therefore worthwhile to understand that RE is part of the curriculum in primary and secondary schools. As such, RE is meant to enable pupils to understand the beliefs

and practices of the world’s religious traditions. It is also designed to promote in children certain moral values that are necessary for cohesion of life in society. These values include tolerance, mutual respect in diversity society, respect the environment, sharing, honesty, self-control and obedience (<https://www.twinkl.com/teaching-wiki/re-religious-education>).

Given the content of the RE curriculum, it is thus inevitable that it should be linked to the kind of education that endeavours to instil in learners the concepts of right and wrong. In other words, claims to the effect that RE is connected to the moral development of learners are plausible. Moral development, as a general concept, “points to the fact that human beings are not born morally mature and suggests that people grow morally through a sequence of more or less gradual changes” (John Macquarrie *et al*, 1986, 396). From this viewpoint, it can be deduced that moral development is a complex concept. For this reason, it raises many questions around which there is little or no consensus among theorists. For instance, there are varied views about what morality exactly means and what this progression of moral development refer to.

However, despite the absence of a homogeneous understanding of moral development, there are notable schools of thought that we can reliably bring into play. Principally, they involve the perception of moral development in these terms: a process that entails internalization of moral norms through socialization; directly learning morals through rewards and punishment as well as emulating role models to such an extent that cognitions and behaviours become conditioned; and, lastly, the six stages of cognitive growth of moral reasoning and judgement as was espoused by Lawrence Kohlberg (John Macquarrie *et al*). In the final analysis, therefore, it can be reasonably concluded from these views that the notion of moral development is indicative of a process of growth through which children acquire virtues that help them to live good lives and become productive members of the society. It is also about the building up of a consistent set of

values and ideas that form the basis for making personal decisions about how to behave in relation to other people and society. According to Owen (2004), morality grows in human beings simultaneously alongside physical limbs, basic mental and social capacities.

Broadly speaking, there are two polarised positions with regard to the role of RE in the moral development of learners. On the one hand, there are theorists that recognize or extol its contribution in inculcating moral values. On the other hand, there are theorists that play down or refute this function of RE.

Bronte (1977), from a negative standpoint, contended that many researches declare that learners do not need religion to be sophisticated human beings; they can learn values without having RE. On this score, Murray (2004) adds that children can learn values without having religious knowledge depending on the environment in which they live. Nucci (1989) also argued that children do not need any RE for living valuable life. On this understanding, there are some universal values that children can adopt regardless of who they are or what family and society they belong to. Leman (2001) supported this idea when he wrote that children do not need any religion for ethical life, but need values and rules that they can follow without the difference of caste and creed.

Besides, the underplay of the moral formative function of RE is reinforced by an appeal to the multifaceted nature of religion. According to Arnold (1964), religion is a complex world which speaks of matters and experiences which are not easily communicable. He argued that some religious experiences are so profound, personal and mysterious that it is doubtful if they are communicable at all except through the emotional language of the art. Similarly, Denis (1989) asserted that values should be transmitted by the family rather than through the school curriculum. In this way, he ruled out the legitimacy of RE as a medium for transmitting values to pupils.

On a positive note, however, there are theorists that counter the negative perception of RE. They generally contend that there is a positive relationship between RE and morality, and that RE provides an alternative solution to the moral challenges that the youths experience. According to Boeree (2003), educators influenced children's moral development not simply by being good role models, as important as it is, but also by what they bring in their daily relationships with children. Perrin (2000) found that there is an affirmative association between RE and the practice of honesty while Nucci (1989), upon investigating the connection between religious knowledge and morality, surmised that RE promotes moral development among the learners. In the same vein, Tritter and Tylor (1992) observed that RE played a vital role in the transmission of moral values into children in high schools in the USA. They contended further that the assimilation of appropriate norms, attitudes and values was perhaps more essential for success than actual knowledge.

Khan (2008) explains further that religious and moral development are inseparable, given that religion drives people's behaviour and actions in an ethically sound direction. This author emphasized the link between religion and morality when he pointed out that religion enables young people to understand the importance of physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being. Furthermore, he wrote that religion helps individuals to develop skills, to make progress in their individual lives and global society and also develops admirable inter-personal values. Similarly, Gerrie (1994) stated that the Draft Declaration and Draft Programme of Action for Social Development had the idea that it is through religion that human beings explore a variety of viewpoints, including their own, moral values such as justice, compassion and integrity.

In general terms, moral education involves socialization, a process by which one's social context shapes their values, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours. The acquisition of

these elements may occur in an unplanned and haphazard and accidental way. In a narrow sense, it refers to a deliberate and calculated manner by which people and institutions inculcate morality into learners (John Macquarrie *at al*). In this vein, Thungu (2010) contends that the acquired aspects of morality enable the individuals to develop into good members of society. As such, education is ultimately a reflection of the values and standards of a society and its educators (Ngaroga 2006).

3.0 Religious Education Learning Experiences in Zambian Schools

In Zambia, the RE curriculum has been formulated in form of syllabus that consists of subject objectives, themes and topics, suggested methods of teaching, learning resources and teaching activities. Its developers (a team of Educational Officers, Senior Education Standard Officers and District Education Standard Officers and subject experts) designed it in such a way that it gave guidance on its implementation in terms of work to be covered in particular periods of time. Its contents were drawn from the four main religious traditions existent in Zambia. These are Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, indigenous Zambian religious beliefs as well as from the religious elements of the Zambian philosophy of Humanism (Curriculum Development Centre 1984).

Currently, the policy which forms the bedrock of Zambia's education system is 'Educating our Future' (Ministry of Education, 1996). It states that the first goal of education system is "to produce a learner capable of being animated by a personally held set of civic, moral and spiritual values". Thus, by studying RE, learners were meant to be assisted to acquire a deeper understanding of life by searching for meaningful answers to life; grow holistically by acquiring life skills such as decision making, problem-solving, critical-thinking, creative thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship, self-awareness, stress and anxiety management, coping with pressures, self-esteem and confidence (Henze, 2000). Lastly, learners were expected to

integrate the best of modernity, tradition and religion, which requires much discernment. Consequently, RE is really about the learner's envisaged integral growth and the hoped for contribution to a better Zambia and the world at large (Curriculum Development Centre 1984).

Given this background, a brief explanation of the methodology that was employed to collect the data, concerning the influence of RE on secondary school learners, is appropriate to place the subsequent presentation of the actual findings into proper context.

3.1 Data Collection Methodology

To appreciate what is happening in the implementation of the RE curriculum and its impact on moral development of learners, the data that has informed the argument of this article, was collected from two selected Secondary Schools of Kapiri Mposhi District. Purposive sampling was used to select the teachers of RE, grade 12 RE pupils, and the School administrators who constituted sample size of the study. A total number of twenty (20) pupils took part in the study, and ten (10) of these were from Kapiri Mposhi Secondary School (five girls and five boys). Another ten (10) were from John II Secondary School, and also consisted of five girls and five boys.

Since the study was largely qualitative in nature, it employed the interpretivist approach paradigm. Specific methods involved these: a face-to-face interview guide to collect data from head teachers and teachers of RE; a nonparticipant observation checklist that was used to collect data from teachers during lesson observations in classrooms and a focus group interview guide that was used to collect data from pupils.

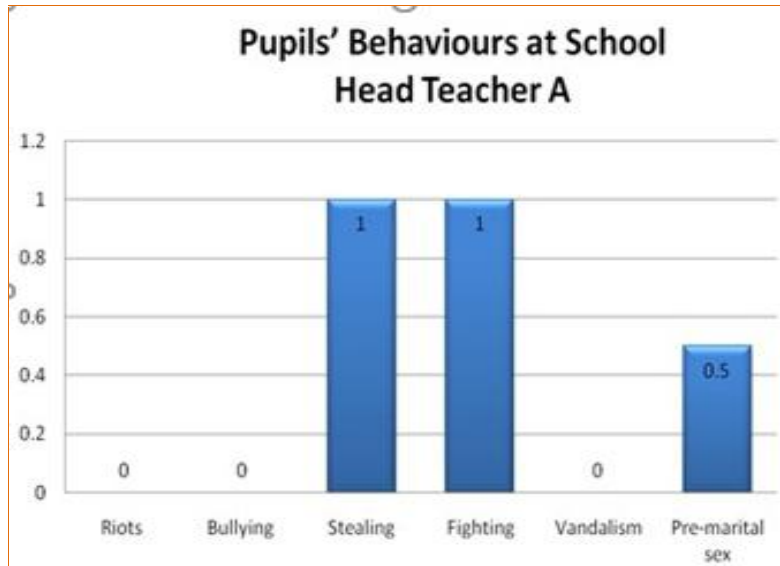
In this methodological approach, the independent variables that were addressed by the study included teachers' characteristics, teaching methodologies, and curriculum content of RE. The dependent variable of the study was moral development whose measurement indicators were

moral values such as sharing, respect honesty, obedience and self-control. The choice of these moral values was anchored in the contents of the General International Bureau of Education’s policy on living together in which it was declared that schools should transmit these universal values to children so as to help them to understand their economic social and political environment (Chesaro, 2003).

3.2 Study Findings

Head teachers were asked if pupils, while at school, exhibited behaviour that signalled or intimated moral underdevelopment in them. The two head teachers under the study stated that pupils were involved in behaviours manifesting moral deficiency. The table below displays unacceptable behaviours that pupils were involved in while at school as mentioned by head teacher A:

Tables 1: Pupils’ Behaviours at School



Source: Field Data 2021

The interview with the second head teacher, revealed a slight variation in the pattern of results on the same scale. The scores were on fighting (0.5), vandalism (0.6) and pre-marital sex (0.4).

The table below displays brief description of the assessment of values of learners that were noted by the head teachers:

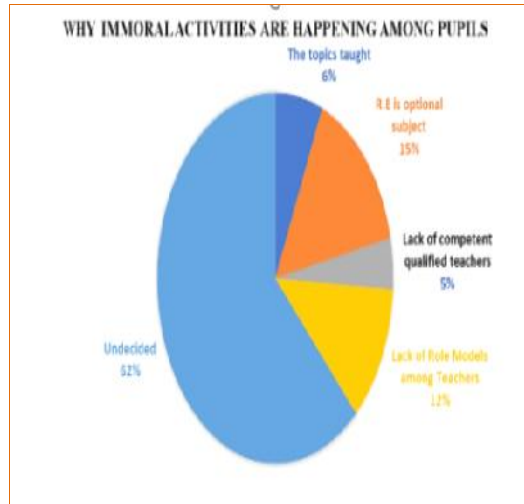
Table 2: Pupils’ Respect at School

RESPECT FOR	HEAD TEACHER – A	HEAD TEACHER- B
Administrators	Yes	Yes
Teachers	Yes	Yes
Prefects	Yes	No answer
Visitors	Yes	Yes
For each other	Yes	No answer

Source: Field Data 2021

The diagram below shows the number of percentages showing responses of pupils on why immoral activities were happening among them.

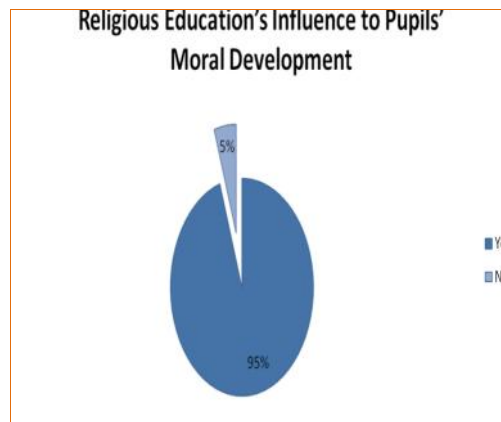
Figure 1



As can be noticed in the above figure, various respondents gave different views to as why immoral activities were being practiced among learners.

The figure below shows the number of RE pupils and their responses regarding the question as to whether the subject influenced pupils' moral development or not:

Figure 2



It worth noting that pupils who gave affirmative answers depicted in figure 2 explained further the basis of their response. Among other reasons, they observed that RE was concerned with real life situations, and it taught learners on how to behave and to react to these situations. Besides, they noted that it helped them by boosting up mental alertness and interaction with God as well

as with each other. They also observed that it helped them to respect other people's religious beliefs and religious moral codes. For example, for a community where divorce was rampant, they explained that RE used the aid of the Bible to condemn such acts. In this way, they opined that ideas learnt in RE were practical and actionable.

On the other hand, the respondents who countered the positive outlook on RE pointed out that RE was not beneficial because not all pupils who took RE behaved morally well. Nonetheless, some also argued that the upright behaviour, which was manifested at school by learners, was non-existent once they went out into society where they exposed themselves to immoral conduct. Others still observed that RE was not beneficial because those who learnt it only cared for friends who also took the subject, but were immoral towards non-participants. In this way, they contended that RE did not teach people good morals but fostered discrimination between the ones who learnt it and those who did not.

On another note, group discussions with pupils indicated that because of the intrinsic significance of RE, most learners believed that RE was a vital factor in their moral development. For this reason, they were of the view that there was need to support its existence in the secondary school curriculum. The pupils further stated that more contemporary challenging topics, such as Satanism, should be incorporated in the school curriculum.

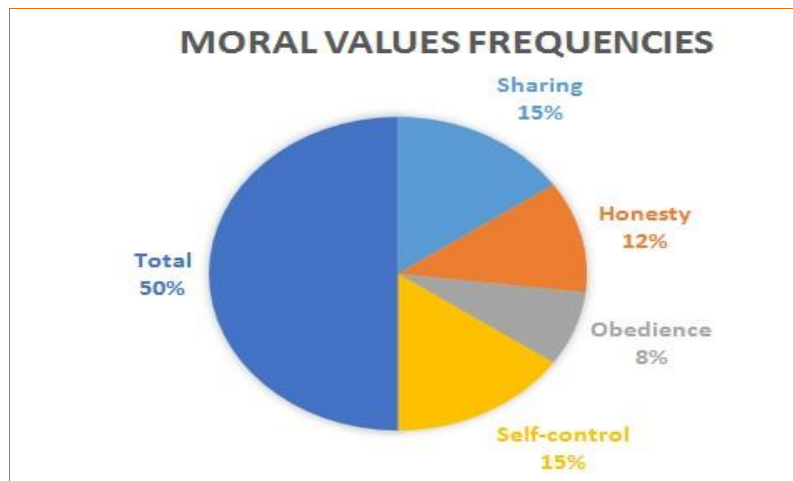
Notwithstanding, a few other discussants made the observation to the effect that though they learnt RE, they had little or no respect to other people's beliefs and moral values which they brought with them from their parents at home. They further contended that though some topics in

RE enabled pupils to know what is right and what is wrong, the study of this course was incapable, in itself, to compel them to do what is right. On this front, they argued that home upbringing determined one's basic propensity to do what is right and avoid what is wrong.

As for the interviewed teachers, the majority noted that RE was good because it offered useful information on morality and helped learners appreciate other religions. This was so because right from grade 8, there were topics taught about right and wrong conduct. They considered this element as one that could potentially change the mindset of learners with social disorders though this was also dependent on their openness to abide by what they were taught. They further explained that RE helped children develop and reflect upon their values and capacity for moral judgment in the face of prevalent moral issues such as abortion, child abuse, defilement, drug abuse, prostitution, child labour, plastic surgery, racism, suicide, corruption, and murder. In this sense, RE assisted learners to develop a positive self-image, personal maturity, awareness of moral choices and skills.

The findings contained in the figure below indicates that secondary school learners who taught according to the religious education content had managed to in stil these specific moral values in the learners:

Figure 3



Apart from the above data, one other significant finding showed that secondary school learners handled by the male teachers developed poorly with respect to the value of sharing. It scored only 1 frequency compared to 6 frequencies observed among learners handled by female teachers. Furthermore, female teachers appeared to have had greater influence on self-control with a frequency of 18, among the learners they taught, compared to only 2 frequencies among the learners of their male colleague.

4.0 Ramifications and Lessons from the Findings

As noted from the foregoing, it is clear that most of the respondents in the study had recognized a relationship between RE and the learners' moral development. Evidently, RE pupils gained some knowledge of what is right and what is wrong. On this score, it would be reasonable, however, to argue that RE built upon the foundation of the morality that pupils may have had from their homes and societies before engaging in RE. Thus, the moral standards and ideas inherent in the RE curriculum augmented, in an instructive way, the moral development of learners. This achievement was not extraordinary in that it conforms to Zambia's Ministry of Education directive (1996) that teachers of RE must acknowledge the fact that pupils needed to be taught to live well, to be reflective about education and also to seek to realise the greater good in life. This aspiration would indeed require teaching the pupils how to exercise critical moral judgments that are based on values.

RE, as a body of knowledge, has an influence on learners in that it relates to their commitment to religious faith, that is, for those who are adherents of any religion that is studied in this discipline. This is so because each of these religions is associated with a moral code or has some form of ethical teachings to which its followers are required to adhere (Singer, 1993). As such, it can be reasonably expected that RE would enhance these learners' moral, social, and cultural development and thus prepare or provide them

with opportunities to explore, make and respond to the meanings of their experiences of the present and future. RE then is valuable in that it encompasses teachings of religions that are represented in the Zambian society, and because of this, it helps to facilitate the application of the values of acceptance and affirmation of cultural identity in which religion is an integral element (Merry & de Ruiter, 2009).

As demonstrated by the study, RE generally inculcated in the pupils an understanding of beliefs and practices which are different from their own as well as respect for others, notwithstanding the religious diversities. Apart from Merry and De Ruiter (2009), Arnold (1964) has also subscribed to this line of thought. Furthermore, he has emphasized that an educational system without RE could only bring disaster to schools in the sense that they would be useless if they produced bright but intolerant and violent people who could not accommodate and accept others. Similarly, Ngaroga (2006) has pointed out that religious education is the only subject in school that plays a vital role in shaping the morality of an individual. Strong beliefs, good values, unselfishness and pro-social behaviour determine the social status of an individual. The values such as justice, fairness, honesty, truth and courtesy, are acceptable and favourable to all human beings, irrespective of their caste and creed. For this reason, character building and learning of moral values have been regarded as the first and foremost goal of education and are emphasized by several educationalists such as Dewey (1934) and Power (1997). Education has also been acknowledged as a vehicle for transmission of good morals by several authors such as Sockett (1993) and Noddings (1992).

Whereas it has been argued by some theorists, such as Arnold (1964), that religion is complex and cannot be easily communicated, there are counter arguments which, to a great extent, support the findings upon which the argument of this article is based. On this front, it is worth noting that even respondents who refuted the formative role of RE were at least able to concede

that religious ideas and moral values could be traced to the pupils' upbringing in their homes and societies. This implies that children are able to somehow grasp such religious matters way before they begin school. At any rate, Durham (1946), one of the pioneers of Sociology of Religion, has also contended that the idea that even children of six to ten years old are ready to understand religion and its complexity. On this understanding, RE is therefore not misplaced when taught to school-going children.

As asserted by Birsch (2002), the greatest and universally acceptable pool of values found in Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism provide all of us with guidelines about how to live ethically and how to solve our social problems. However, though fifteen percent of the learners recommended that the subject be made compulsory as a measure of curbing immorality among them, it would only be proper that care is taken to avoid compromising on the fundamental "right to freedom of thought, conscience and religious" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, Article 18).

The findings of the study highlighted the disparity between the impact of male and female teachers in communicating and instilling moral values in pupils. Evidently, there was demonstrable and significant relationship between gender of secondary school RE teachers and moral development of secondary school learners in the two selected schools under the study. These findings could be an indicator of the real situation of reduced possibilities for sharing in the classes that are handled by male teachers as opposed to those handled by female teachers. On this score, however, we can also plausibly draw upon the insight of Freire (1994) who has observed that male teachers tend to have an attitude of not caring about the future prospects of learners. This view can, to some extent, explain the difference in the influence of teachers' gender on moral development of children. Kath (2005) has further noted that this could be a potential source of discrimination against men who are involved in the early childhood teaching as it demoralizes them and thus contributes to their low output in

terms of stimulating the moral development of learners.

Despite the favourable position on RE, as demonstrated in the foregoing discussion, the fact remains that some findings, both from the reviewed literature and the collected data, do not support it. The question therefore that subsists this far is how then do we account for these opposing views. In this respect, it patently appears that the answer lies in the very nature of moral development as defined herein, that is, a process that is dynamic or incremental and whose fullness cannot be attained overnight. On the basis of this understanding, one cannot expect learners of RE to be instantly morally sound or perfect. For moral development is, in this perspective, an ideal to be continually sought after.

Conclusion

This article has established RE makes a distinctive contribution to the Zambian School curriculum. To this end, it endeavours to develop learners' knowledge and understanding of civic, moral, spiritual and religious values found in the Zambian society. No society can exist without moral values and RE serves as a useful mode through which these values, which promotes cohesive relationship and consistent patterns of conduct, are transmitted to individuals especially during their tender age in schools. In so doing, RE complements the religious and moral training that learners acquire from their homes and societies even prior to coming to school. Despite manifestations of moral deficiencies, the contribution that RE makes to moral development of children remains valuable and an opportunity for their personal fulfilment and development to become responsible citizens of Zambia. Moral development is, nonetheless, a life-long engagement, and therefore optimism should prevail even in the face immoral behaviours of RE learners. Though moral development is not depended solely on RE, this subject can be a significant factor when it is well-developed and implemented.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations arising from this study:

-) Religious Education should continue being taught in schools as a way of ensuring pupils learn about spiritual and moral dimensions of life.
-) The curriculum of RE require regular reviews in order to incorporate views of all the stakeholders and ensure that its contents as well as delivery holistically address the lives of the learners. For this reason, the government of Zambia, through the Ministry of General Education, should regularly call for this conversation on moral development, taking into account emerging and topical moral issues.
-) Parents and teachers should always collaborate when it comes to imparting moral values into the pupils so that there is no conflict between what is taught in schools and what is taught at home with regard to moral development.
-) Teachers should present high ethical role model for valuable and solid inculcation of moral values in the students in their school.
-) Religious education should not indoctrinate pupils but make them think critically and constructively about real life and basic questions concerning it.

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Quick Response Code	Subject: Education
DOI: 10.22192/ijamr.2022.09.03.011	

How to cite this article:

Lewis Bwalya Chilufya, Robbie Andrew Bbakasa. (2022). The Influence of Religious Education in the Moral Development of Learners: A Case of Selected Schools in Zambia. Int. J. Adv. Multidiscip. Res. 9(3): 128-138.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22192/ijamr.2022.09.03.011>