

# **Social Construction of 2017 Religious Education Policy in Eswatini and Struggles between Constitutional and Educational agendas**

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## **Abstract**

*This study explores the social construction of Religious Education policy of 2017 in Eswatini. It describes Members of Parliament, Curriculum Designers and teachers' reception of policy change. It was ignited by one of legislators' claim that the introduction of this policy had complexities and a motion has to be raised to overturn it. Bowe and Ball with Gold (1992) one of the three sites of policy construction was used. Convenience sampling and snowball /respondent-driven sampling were used to sample participants. Eighteen (MPs), twenty six teachers and four Designers were sampled. Interviews and semi-structured questionnaires were used to collect data and analysed through content analysis. Findings indicated that social construction of policy was championed and won on ideological and political basis of powerful groups in government and historical background of the country. Findings revealed that policy was influenced by government common assumption that what was written on that policy would get either taught or learnt and positively influence society. Findings indicated that this policy was driven by government with limited involvement of key stakeholders. It concluded the social construction was anchored on Christian ideological and political basis of powerful groups. It concluded that although, this policy was orchestrated at Prime Ministers' office but some key stakeholders were in favour of it.*

**Key words:** Christian values, RE construction, Policy

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Date of Submission: 02-07-2022

Date of Acceptance: 14-07-2022

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## **I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

This study explores the social construction of the Religious Education curriculum policy of 2017 in Eswatini. It is a policy analysis study, which could guard against misrepresentations and over simplifications of other peoples' ideas on the RE Christian-oriented curriculum in Eswatini. This is important because misrepresentations of curriculum matters have an important bearing on the adoption and implementation process (Halpin, 1990).

This study was ignited by one of the legislators' claim that the introduction of the RE curriculum policy had some complexities and a motion has to be raised to overturn it. This was achieved through describing the legislators (Members of Parliament), Curriculum Designers and teachers' reception of the RE curriculum policy change processes and construction.

The social construction of the R.E curriculum provides a unique context which to examine the dynamics underlying the 2017 R.E. policy change and the cultural politics of education in Eswatini. It was perceived as a unique educational project because of its directive-oriented nature. This policy was socially constructed, designed and crafted through directives from the Prime Minister's office and via the Ministry of Education and Training (Ministry of Education and Training Selected Circulars Academic Year, 2017).

The first part of the paper focuses on the historical changes of the RE curriculum processes in Eswatini. The R.E. curriculum has experienced some fundamental changes since 1844 when formal schooling was introduced in the Kingdom of Eswatini. The first type of RE curriculum was the Christian-oriented one, which was pioneered by the missionaries. For decades the Christian-oriented curriculum dominated the education system until 2006, when the multi-faith based curriculum was introduced by government. Concepts from different religions (Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Bahai, Islam, Eswatini Traditional Religion, and Christianity) formed part of the curriculum or major strands and sub strands. Sub-strands were derived from the major ones.

The RE curriculum changes more often were made to reflect the cultural and religious realities of current Eswatini contexts. Similar RE curriculum changes were also taking place in other parts of the world. For example, it is claimed that Norway introduced a multi-faith curriculum in the 1990s' because of the country's

changing cultural and religious realities (Adamson and Morris, 1997). This emphasises the argument that curriculum prescriptions derive from a state's commitment to pursue certain key goals of national imperatives or interests, based on analysis of perceptible developments in current societal challenges and realities to which schools have to respond in a sustainable way. The societal realities include the religious demography in the Kingdom of Eswatini and history of the country on religious matters and practices. These matters urged government, education authorities and politicians active involvement in promoting values that were considered universal to all societies and those that were particular or more valued within the Eswatini society.

### **Dominant cultural and religious realities of Eswatini social contexts**

The 2017 RE curriculum changes more often than not were influenced and made to reflect the existing dominant cultural and religious realities of Eswatini social contexts than international practices such as responding to international demands at the expense of local social realities.

The RE curriculum change was anchored on the on-going struggles, debates and negotiations between global agendas and local tested Christian values which had characterised the RE curriculum changes in Eswatini and beyond (Dlamini, 2018). For more than forty years, the Eswatini RE Curriculum had been characterised by Christian values more than other religious values. Thus, embracing both global and local religious values and agendas of the RE curriculum has become problematic because it became more difficult to entertain one without undermining the other aspects.

The dynamic processes of the 2017 RE curriculum change created spaces in which local Christian values can be legitimised and sustained without being undermined by globalised agendas such as the international concept of religious diversity and inclusivity in schools.

Dominant religious realities in Eswatini forced government of the day to change the multi-faith RE curriculum to Christian-oriented one (see Table 4). The reversal change was sensitive to both religious realities and policies of the land such as the Constitution of 2005, to ensure that religious matters were not undermined as are protected by section 23 (2) of the Swaziland Constitution of 2005 which states that a person shall not be hindered in the enjoyment of the freedom of conscience or religion, and for the purpose of this section freedom of conscience includes freedom of thoughts and of religion, freedom to change religion or belief and freedom of worship either alone or in community with others.

### **Swaziland Constitution of 2005 and RE Matters**

In this specified section 23 (1) of the Swaziland Constitution of 2005, the issue of school curriculum, students' learning and whether they are taught of a certain religion or not is not covered on the Constitution of 2005. Thus, students could be taught of a certain religion subject content and not being taught of any specific religion subject content at a given time, is not a clear constitutional matter. The Swaziland Constitution of 2005 is silent on curriculum matters or curriculum matters are not explicitly explained or clearly mentioned on the constitution. This scenario, gives government a legal base to introduce any type of religion related subject content into the education system without a challenge. For example, when the government of Eswatini re-introduced the Christian-oriented curriculum in 2016, parents with children in schools who may be happy to see their children studying or learning a multi-faith religious curriculum were reluctant to challenge government in court because the issue of learning a multi-faith or Christian-oriented curriculum has no legal or Constitutional base in the Kingdom of Eswatini (see Section 23 (1) of Swaziland Constitution of 2005). This section does not stop any government of the day or in power to introduce any religious related curriculum deemed fit for the country's national interest and sustainability. Thus, the RE Christian curriculum content had experienced two un-negotiated different changes for the country's national interests.

### **2017 R.E Christian-oriented curriculum Content**

The R.E Christian-oriented curriculum content is guided by the rationale of the Eswatini education system, which focuses on the development of the whole student and it is used as a vehicle to achieve this by teaching different competencies; values, practices, beliefs and knowledge which could contribute a Christian value laded individual or Christian outlook on students life and society. The RE curriculum as others was strategically designed to suit socio-economic needs of the country.

The Christian-oriented curriculum aims and objectives are similar for Primary level grade 1-7, Juniorsecondary level form 1-3, and different for Senior secondary level form 4-5 of the education system. The aims and objectives differ in these levels because of the students' cognitive level of their development but all the objectives are anchored on Christian principles, values and other related competencies. This is also emphasised on the Eswatini General Certificate of Secondary Education (EGCSE) religious education syllabuses for form 4 and 5, where it is noted that the purpose of the RE syllabus is that through the study of the life of and teachings of Jesus Christ and the Acts of the Apostles; students will have an understanding of the Christian beliefs, teachings, practices and influences on the lives of individuals and community, and eventually be encouraged to

adopt values and behaviour in their daily lives (Examination Council of Eswatini, SEGCE Religious Education Syllabus no: 6893, 2018).

**RE curriculum organisation**

The R.E Christian-oriented curriculum content is organised in phases. For example, in primary level there is content specifically for the foundation phase grade 1-2, middle phase grade 3-4 and upper phase grade 5-7 (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). These help in contextualising the content to the cognitive level of the learners, however, the objectives are the same across these phases. The objectives are divided under different themes: knowledge, understanding and skills. The learners are expected to develop knowledge, understanding and skills in order to have understanding of the tenets of the Christian faith as contain in the bible; interpret biblical teachings; learn from the lives of Christians who show others how to care for one another, and share with each other. The learners are expected to develop attitudes and values which could help them to appreciate and develop Christian virtues such as love, humility, peace, caring, honesty, respect, sharing, diligence, and relate to Christian moral principles to their personal and social life in society.

The R.E Christian-oriented curriculum Content for each phase is divided into strands. Each strand is further divided into sub-strand. For example for the foundation phase, there are different strands, which include worship in Christianity, the life of Jesus Christ; Christian values (see Table 1 Content Overview for Grade 1-2 Foundation Phase).

**Table 1 Content Overview for Grade 1-2 Foundation Phase**

<b>Strands</b>	<b>Sub-Strands in the Foundation Phase</b>
Worship in Christianity	Belief in God: Christian worship: Christian festivals and ceremonies
The Life of Jesus Christ	Birth and boyhood of Jesus: The teachings of Jesus Christ; The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
Christian moral values	Christian moral values: learning from other

**Source: Ministry of Education and Training, 2018.**

These strands and sub-strands are contextualised to learners’ experiences and situations. Learners are expected to be taught how the life of Jesus and the value of care, love, empathy and compassion are important for peoples’ lives and sustainability of societies. Examples are drawn from the Bible as an approved teaching source rich with the targeted values. In the long term students are expected to show respect, tolerance, love towards others, taking responsibilities, learning how their behaviours impact on others, finding ways of working and living with others in society. Students are prepared to be future peaceful citizens, peacemakers and sustainers of society, through biblical scriptures (Mathew 5:9 emphasis that blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. This statement has a high potential of enhancing the value of love in a way that brings peace and stability in society.

**Table 2 Content overview for Junior Secondary level**

<b>Forms</b>	<b>Syllabus themes</b>
Form 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to Religious Education</li> <li>• The Bible</li> <li>• Creation and God’s Promises; Abraham</li> <li>• Sinai Covenant</li> <li>• Leadership in Israel: Saul, David and Solomon.</li> <li>• Faith and God’s Promises: Abraham</li> </ul>
Form 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Old testament prophesies about Messiah</li> <li>• The Infancy and Early Life of Jesus</li> <li>• The Galilean Ministry</li> <li>• The Journey and the Ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem</li> <li>• Jesus’ Passion, Death and Resurrection</li> </ul>
Form 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Christianity and Social Behaviour</li> </ul>

**Source: Ministry of Education and Training, 2018.**

The RE content across the levels of the education system embraces the history and origin of the Christianity, the nature of the people who were living in that era of Christ. The main purpose of the RE across the education system is to expose the learners to Christianity or Christian values. This involves understanding

the role of Christian beliefs, teachings and practices' influences on the lives of individuals and communities, and urging individuals to adopt Christian values and behaviours. It also aims at making the students to appreciate the lives of those people who lived and experienced the era of Christ and to contextualise it to their current contexts.

### **Bible Approved RE teaching source**

The Bible forms part of the RE teaching source and its contents are specifically chosen because of their perceived power to shape the Eswatini society in a Christian way. These contents include the faith and God's promises (Abraham's promise by God), as define in the book of Hebrews 11;1-6; Abraham's Acts and Belief in God as explained in Genesis 12:1-9, 12:1-19, 15: 1-6, 17: 21: 1-7, , 23-24. The issue of God's covenant in the book of Genesis 15; 1-19 is used to explain the Sinai covenant and its significance in today's setting, or peoples' lives. The cross of Red sea (Exodus 14: 5: 31); the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 1-17). The Kingship in Israel of King Saul, David and King Solomon (1 Samuel 8:1-9, 8: 10-20, 1 Kings 3-12) are taught because of their relevance to the Eswatini context, where the Kingship role is highly appreciated and valued by many Eswatini.

The infancy and early life of Jesus is taught and specific scriptures used to teach specific values to the learners. The book of Luke 2: 1-20, which covers the birth of Jesus Christ and his dedication to humankind (Luke 2: 21-40). The message on the forgiveness of the sinful women (7:36, 8:3) and its impact on society are emphasised and contextualised in classroom pedagogical discourses. This has the potential power to increase unity, peace and sustainable society. When students and others are treated with respect, worth and integrity, it builds the culture of confidence in themselves and society, and disrupts the culture of violence. The book of Luke 2: 1-20, aims at disrupting the culture of violence in society and enhancement of natural care work, which include jobs in teaching, Child care and Health care that demand humanist skills such as listening, respecting each other and caring.

### **Connectedness Organising Mechanism**

The RE content serves as a connectedness organising mechanism in society because the connectedness could be enhanced through the principles of empathy (see Luke 7:36, 8:3), love and respect, which could dissolve barriers between people. Empathy for example, has the capacity to facilitate the ability to find common ground for solution building. Through peoples' affective responses to another and their cognitive capacity to manage emotional related matters. The book of Luke 2: 1-20, which covers the birth of Jesus Christ and his dedication to humankind (Luke 2: 21-40) aim at enhancing students affective and cognitive capacities. Both affective and cognitive perspectives are developed simultaneously. Affective perspective entails sharing another individual's emotional state while cognitive capacity involves the individual's capacity to take the perspective of the other person and see in his neighbour a shared humanity that bids them together as human beings (Lammert et al., 2007). Jansen, (2008) noted that it could be difficult for people to scale the deep societal challenges and divisions that separate them until they recognise the likeness among themselves or develop the affective response to others.

### **Good Samaritan or Compassionate Samaritan**

The story of the Good Samaritan or compassionate Samaritan, which was told or narrated by Jesus to an inquiry lawyer who was challenging him with this question, who is my neighbour?, depicts the relevance of the RE content which embraces the values of care, love and compassion. This is a biblical story with biblical messages shared as part of the educational process of making sense of how the learners could live together in society. Societal contexts which embrace empathy, harmony have a potential of embracing empathy and harmony could enhance societal flourishing through a focus on what connects them. Ball, (1990) noted that a flourishing, healthy, peaceful and successful society could not be attained by analysing problems and eliminating them but by focusing on what connects the people. Cole et al., (2005) claimed that what connects people promote mutual respect, interdependence, and inclusive pedagogical discourses. These pedagogical discourses have a potential of promoting an inclusive future society. Mutual respect facilitates the engagement of students who may be a verge of exclusion, by teachers showing respect for students and their learning. Successful learning depends on staffs' respect for students, where the staffs are taking a lead in modelling respectful forms of interaction, where students feel unthreatened to approach a member of the staff when they experience difficulties of any form, a staff member who will listen and offer constructive advice and support.

### **RE Curriculum key Principles**

The RE curriculum principles (empathy, love, care, respect, compassion) support a deeper awareness of self-awareness of self, within the wider society. These principles have profound implications regarding how members of society relate to each other, how they respond to ethical challenges and guiding how societies need to function. Quality of these principles could be the greatest contributor in strengthening social interaction and

cohesion, through their abilities to motivate individual citizens to cooperate, share resources and to help each other.

These principles serve as precursor for compassionate action and key important organising mechanism for enhancing inclusion and connectedness in schools and society. Compassionate, empathetic actions have the potentials to enhance peoples' abilities to transcend their individual's differences, beliefs and nationality (Liu and Robertson, 2010). These principles have the power to orient individuals' empathetically towards fellow human beings (Parameshwar, 2006).

### **RE Secondary schools content**

In form 4 and 5 the students are expected to study two books from the bible. It is approved source used in schools together with the RE texts books. Specified passages from the gospel of St. Luke are used, and this include the Acts of the Apostles Chapter 1-21: 15 (see Table 3 Content overview For Senior Education level).The content was specific enough to provide topic areas for each grade level and complementary instructional teaching strategies and flexible enough to all for individual teaching differences and skills among students.

RE texts books were designed to help teachers in designing the daily or weekly RE lessons, offer teachers the necessary guide and steps which link their classroom teachings and subject outcomes. The texts helped them to learn basic RE concepts and develop Christian values and skills as mandated by the Ministry Education and Training.

**Table 3 Content overview for Senior Education level form 4-5**

<b>Topics</b>	<b>Themes</b>
The portrayal of the Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Luke	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to the Gospel of St. Luke and its historical context</li> <li>• The life and ministry of Jesus Christ according to the gospel of St. Luke</li> <li>• Conflict and opposition to Jesus</li> <li>• The passion narratives</li> </ul>
Acts of the Apostles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Background to the Acts of the Apostles</li> <li>• The birth of Church and the spread of the church in Jerusalem</li> <li>• The life of the early church</li> <li>• The spread of the church to the rest of the world</li> </ul>
The portrayal of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevance of the teachings to Eswatini contexts</li> <li>• Relevance of the gospel for Christians today in the context of Eswatini</li> </ul>
The birth narratives and Childhood of Jesus Christ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annunciations to Zachariah and Mary (1:5-38)</li> <li>• Mary visits Elizabeth (1:39-56)</li> <li>• The birth of John and Jesus (1:57-66), (2: 1-21)</li> <li>• Jesus presented in the temple (2:22-40)</li> <li>• Jesus in the temple at the age of 12 (2: 41-52)</li> <li>• Relevance of the birth and childhood of Christ for Christians today and in the Eswatini context</li> </ul>
Jesus' Teachings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Main teachings of Jesus on prayer , love, judging others, forgiveness, giving</li> <li>• Jesus treatment of marginalised groups of people; gentiles, poor women, the sick, children, oppressed and outcasts.</li> </ul>

**Source: Examination Council of Eswatini, 2018**

### **RE Competence Modelled**

Table 1-3 depicts that the RE curriculum is characterised by a set of competencies: knowledge, skills and values that are expected to be evident in the behaviours of students and members of society and be displayed in their daily activities. The RE curriculum is anchored on the competency model, developed from behavioural and positive perspective aiming at core behaviours and skills needed in a wide range of occupations in society. In this model the curriculum was viewed as mechanistic devoid of the Eswatini contexts and removed

from government collective social change efforts of addressing societal decay. This is depicted by the characteristics of the RE curriculum subject content which embraced that learning is holistic because it includes learners' cognitive processing of relevant knowledge based on their interactions with situations they encounter in local contexts.

### **The Bible approved learning source**

The bible and other Christian oriented texts books for the relevant grades are the only approved sources and used as main teaching sources in schools. In addition, other relevant materials are also used to enhance the teaching process. For example, commentaries on biblical texts could be used to enhance and support teaching of RE in schools. The use of these additional sources could depend on teachers' capabilities and willingness to search for these extra learning materials and students' exposure to these numerous sources on biblical texts. Though in today's society people are believed to be living in the knowledge-based society but in reality some teachers and students because of different circumstances could not be exposed to the required sources on biblical texts. This could force both teachers and students to rely on the bible as an approved document and the prescribed texts books. In addition, the teacher could not have the competencies to interpret the biblical sources, yet one of the objectives of this subject is to help students to interpret biblical teachings and themes (Examination Council of Eswatini, 2018).

### **Christianity and the 2005 Constitution of Swaziland.**

In April 2018, the country known as the Kingdom of Swaziland was renamed Kingdom of Eswatini. The Kingdom of Eswatini is predominantly Christian (90%) but constitutionally this is not the country's official religion (see the Swaziland Constitution of 2005). Despite many people effort to make the country Christianity failed in 2005 when the Constitution was endorsed as the supreme law of the land. This effort was rejected because Eswatini consists of other religions such as Muslims and Eswatini traditional religion. Eswatini it is difficult to documents the total number of people who belong to a certain religion because some they practice both Christianity and Eswatini Traditional religion simultaneously. The existing documentation on the number of people who belongs to a certain religion is misleading in Eswatini because it is usually documented by "outsiders" researchers without understanding the local complexities of religious matters in country.

### **History of Missionaries' Involvement in Shaping R.E. Policy Change process**

The Kingdom of Eswatini used the historical approach to initiate the religious RE curriculum policy changes. Christianity, through the work of missionaries has long shaped and reshaped the history of the kingdom and traditions and continues to exert massive influence on every citizen's life even today (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). It is claimed that His Majesty King Somhlolo's vision of the coming of Christianity to Eswatini is fulfilled through the teaching of RE in schools (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018).

The history of missionaries shaped the R.E. policy change in the country in complex ways because the policymakers who advocated for the change process supported their arguments with past-missionaries-oriented good values (respect, trust, compassion and care). It was claimed that these values helped to cement peace and stability in the country. For the past fifty years or more, the country has enjoyed peace and stability, because the Christian values enhanced peoples' behaviours in a positive way. The missionary-oriented practices have also influenced the culture of most institutions in Eswatini. For example, most institutions in the land they open their daily business with a word of prayer and this is one of the key aspects of the R.E. policy.

Some of the influential policymakers such as the late Prime Minister Dr Barnabas S. Dlamini were the graduates from mission institutions and their lives were influenced by missionary values. Even at family level some were socialised on missionary or Christian values because their parents were Preachers, socialising people on Christian values. When these policy makers advocated for R.E. policy change were influenced by their missionary values and position of influence and command of power. Giroux, (1992) stated that national curriculum is initiated and manufactured to reflect the expected values considered important by powerful groups.

The missionary values were embraced within the R.E. policy change to enforce and reinforce cultural homogeneity, promoting shared Christian values, attitudes and shared Christian historical memories to shape the current and future of Eswatini. The missionary values were perceived as a springboard for creating a society in which the members could actively support and subscribe to Christian norms.

The missionaries were indirectly involved in shaping RE. policy change and offered the policymakers means of realising hegemony in society through R.E curriculum. Realising hegemony in society depends on realising hegemony in the classroom, through hegemonic pedagogical discourses characterised by respect, trust and empathy (Daniel et al. 1998). Hegemonic pedagogical discourses are enhanced by positive relationship between the teacher and students, where everyone feels valued, trusted, respected and given responsibilities

alongside with sensitive teaching approaches for societal changes (Daniel et al. 1998). These values aim at enhancing societal changes and peoples' possession of Christian values, which could be reproduced through education.

### **Drivers of 2017 R.E Policy Change in Eswatini**

The RE policy change process was rapidly and this characterised the management practices of the education system in 2017. The rapidly change processes within the education sector were demonstrated by the twelve different circulars crafted in 2017. These include Circular No.2 of 2017 which declared Religious Education as a core subject with effect from January 2017 and Circular No. 12 of 2017 which declared teaching of Siswati literature and Language as a core subject in all schools in the Kingdom (Ministry of Education and Training Selected Circulars Academic Year, 2017).

The Eswatini state changed the nature of its R.E. curriculum context in part to adhere to social economic related factors and other national imperatives, sustaining the culture of peace and stability in the Kingdom. The policy change was reactive in nature; it was reacting to some toxic environment or situation which requires peoples' self-reflection, self-observation and self-awareness. This reactive element is captured on the rationale of RE, which claims that this subject deals with the development of the individuals in relation to self-awareness and their relationships with others in society.

When the R.E. curriculum reform was initiated national socio-economic interests were considered. For example, citizens' connectedness, peace and stability were considered to be an integral part of the reform process. Citizen's connectedness is one of the defining attributes of the Eswatini society which has cemented the culture of peace and stability in the Kingdom for decades. Connectedness has impacted the peace functions and existence of the country for years. It has enhanced the interdependence of EmaSwati among themselves and others, and acted as a glue that connects them with the outside world. The concept of EmaSwati as individuals who are connected to other people has a long history which was cemented by the arrival of missionaries. For the past years EmaSwati citizens' connectedness has depicted its power to promote the culture of care, compassion, empathy, collectivism as opposed to individualism. Connectedness has enabled a greater sense of oneness among EmaSwati and the external world. It enhanced mutual respect, understanding, cooperation, integration and avoided fragmentation and exclusionary practices in society. These Christian values connect or depict the history of missionaries' indirect involvement in shaping of R.E. policy change and design process in the Kingdom of Eswatini.

### **RE Curriculum Design Process**

In Eswatini the RE Curriculum design process was done through the Religious Education panel who review the subject content. The members of the panel were drawn from primary schools, Regional Education Offices, National Curriculum centre, Teachers' Training Colleges and Universities. While the members of the RE curriculum writing team are drawn from the National Curriculum centre, Regional Education Offices, schools, universities and Teacher Training Colleges, and headed by the Senior Inspector of Religious Education, from the national Ministry of Education and Training. The composition of these groups is mainly characterised by their expertise not their religious orientation. Religious organisations such as Council of Swaziland Churches and League of Churches were not directly involved in curriculum innovation, and in boards and committees responsible for curriculum innovation and change.

The R.E, Curriculum in Eswatini came as a directive from politicians but the crafting was done by the education officials from the Ministry of Education and Training and teacher training institutions. The 2017 RE directive was one aspect of which legislated for the RE Christian oriented curriculum. It only provided a legislative framework for the development, and implementation and management of the RE curriculum. It says little or nothing about the design of the curriculum.

The RE curriculum change policy did not utilise much of foreign education experts as a source of ideas. In the past Eswatini educational thinking has been enriched by a steady stream of visits from foreign experts to help on designing learning materials and other educational logistics. The RE curriculum related materials were not characterised by a multi-year plan for writing, piloting, modifying. It was a one year plan process characterised by multidimensional approach.

The Curriculum designers from the Curriculum centre, RE educators from the pedagogical higher institutions of learning and a number of teachers from both primary and secondary education contributed to these efforts ("debating" and writing up the texts books). The curriculum writers attempted to write the RE curriculum and revisited the philosophy that was based on Christian values.

The contextualised relevance of the textbooks, values and ideas, and the capabilities of the writers to construct relevant and contextualised textbooks were recognised. Their academic efforts reflected their willingness to find a way of determining and expressing the RE goals and outcomes, which government expects schools to achieve with students.

The processes for creating the RE curriculum was complex because time was not on their side because it had to be implemented within a year's time frame. There were many conceptual and technical matters involved: the contextualised relevance of the curricular values, ideas, and availability of resources to support the change. Resources were limited because the country's economy standing was not healthy.

### **Policy change Driven by Politicians**

While in other countries, educational changes might be prompted by teachers and others such trade unions, other pressure groups' thinking on curriculum matters and priorities, but the R.E. policy change process originated from the Prime minister's office. Thus, the R.E. policy change in Eswatini was driven by the politicians; they were initiators of the change process. The R.E. curriculum policy change was not done in isolation, but it was based on different curriculum review documents (independent review of the primary curriculum report of 2014 and others), which also assisted the education sector to consolidate its priorities. The reviews also gave birth to key documents such as the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2018-2022 and Education Sector policy of 2018 which shaped the R.E. curriculum. These policy documents provided the framework for subject policy changes and support for vision 2022 through the education sector. The documents supported the R.E. policy change and Language policy change, which were driven by government desired competencies, which were in line with identified socio-economic needs of the country, as documented on key national policy documents: Swaziland National Development Strategy (NDS) and Poverty Reduction Strategy and Action Plan (PRSAP). The curriculum was aligned with different national policies such as the first written policy, Imbokodvo manifesto policy of 1972, which aimed at promoting cooperation among the people of Eswatini and others for mutual benefit.

### **The R.E. Curriculum Change Policy, Swaziland National Development Strategy (NDS) and Poverty Reduction Strategy and Action Plan (PRSAP) Interplay**

The achievement of the Swaziland National Development Strategy (NDS) and Poverty Reduction Strategy and Action Plan (PRSAP) objectives partly depend on education. Educated working force equipped with different competencies has a potential to help government to achieve her vision. In taking forward the development agenda, the government, undertook a comprehensive subjects curriculum policy changes, including the R.E. policy change to align it with the Swaziland National Development Strategy (NDS) and Poverty Reduction Strategy and Action Plan (PRSAP) objectives. The aim was to amass Christian values to support and accelerate inclusive growth, reduce poverty and social injustices in society.

The success of the country in supporting and accelerating inclusive growth, reducing poverty and social injustices in society partly depend on Christian values or on citizens who are empathetic, compassionate, and connected to each other by common values. Connectedness promotes mutual respect and interdependence, thus lead to team spirit (Cole, et al. 2005). These competencies were embraced on the R.E. curriculum policy changes to achieve national goals.

The R.E. Curriculum reform was manufactured to reflect the values considered important by the government. It became an instrument for socialising students to perceived important Christian values and ideologies. The R.E. Curriculum reform became a vehicle through which attempts were made to disseminate and reinforce the perceived good Christian values in Eswatini society. This shows the complex interplay between educational institutions, social institutions and curriculum reforms and how the R.E. curriculum was shaped and framed by broader layers of context and social dynamics. For example, in some countries the dissemination of values and ideologies is achieved through direct political control (Apple, 1993), where the political ideologies and basis of the policy is decided by government and powerful interest groups. This is referred to as the context of influence (Bowe and Ball, 1992).

The key purpose of the policy change was to accelerate or contribute to the processes that build more ethical and vibrant Eswatini context that encourages the development of mutual interdependence and the achievement of national goals.

The reduction of poverty and sustainable economic development depend on peoples' mutual respect and mutual trust, and interdependence. Peoples' interdependence enhances their abilities to re-orient themselves empathetically towards others (Parameshware, 2006), for sustainable development.

### **RE Curriculum Global and Local Realities**

The 2017 RE curriculum policy change process was rather complex because it raised a variety of global and local issues. For example, the global agenda of inclusion through subject pedagogical discourses influenced the RE curriculum. Policymakers had to think deeply on how to embrace the culture of inclusion within the realities of RE pedagogical discourses to enhance social cohesion and trust in societies. Teaching the RE curriculum can be very contentious in a multi-faith society where parents of the minority could worry about which values are being taught or inculcated (Ghosh, 2014), it might further prevent development of respect of



other religions, prevent students from exercising their religious choice, encouraging narrow mindedness and homogeneity rather than diversity and religious instruction which avoids the marginalisation of minority groups. Global RE curriculum expectations and local realities caused some anxieties among policymakers and politicians. The global agenda of multiculturalism, secularism, religious fundamentalism have influenced educators and policymakers on RE curriculum. For example, some educators have claimed that religious fundamentalism have to be addressed in schools, as important sites for development of values, ideas, attitudes and perspectives (Ghosh, 2014), while others believed that religious fundamentalism have become major concerns globally because of their links to extremism and terrorism. Religious fundamentalism is not confined to any one religious tradition, but some are more linked to destructive politics who led successful political revolution (Ghosh, 2014), for example, the Iranian revolution of 1979.

Fundamentalism has an unsustainable element because of its distinct religious logic, the oppositional movement towards the state and an envisioned moral order defined by peoples' religious commitment and position of influence. People may be positioned by their religious thinking and positioned themselves in and through their religious identity (Ghosh, 2014), thus promote self-exclusion and community destruction. Individual's religious position or positionality of the mind and religious identity are complex matters with huge implications in society. Students' religious position or positionalties and religious identity produces different and distinctive individual students for schools to deal with. For example a teacher was beheaded in France after showing cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad during a lesson in October 2020. These religious complexities of differences and diversities need to be reflected on school contexts.

The global agenda of inclusion in educational pedagogical discourses and the increased of migration or influx of immigrants posed challenges for RE curriculum, social cohesion and also an opportunity for educational change. Professionals have to think deeply on the design of the curriculum, education system and its policies. These are key in determining the nature of the expected society. Members of society without appropriate skills to participate socially and economically could generate higher costs for health, social security systems and peace and stability.

## **II. Methodology**

The intent of the study was to qualitatively describe the legislators (Members of Parliament MPs), Curriculum Designers and teachers' reception of the RE curriculum policy change in Eswatini.

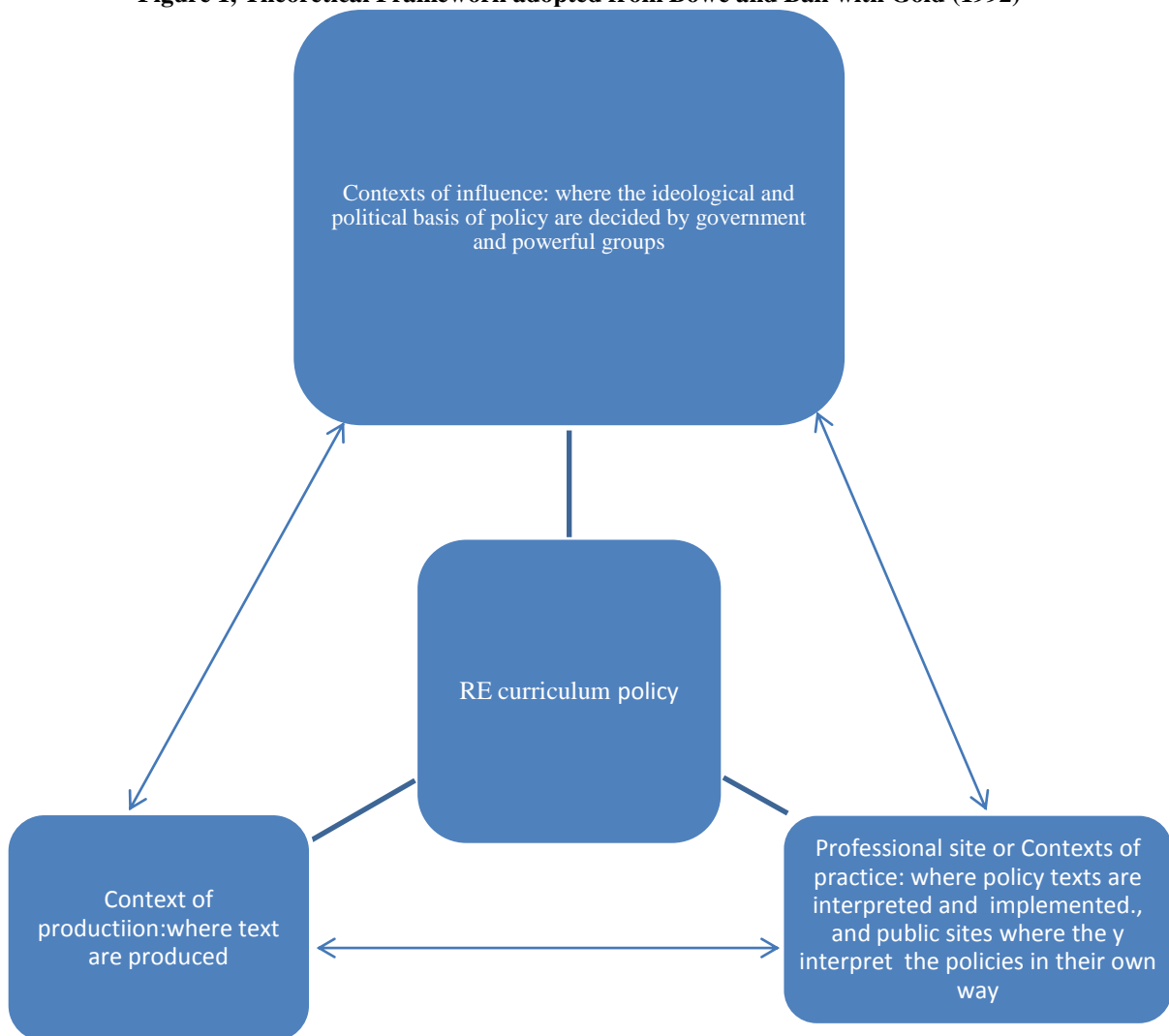
A triangulated research design included content analysis of existing RE curriculum documents and interviews with the participants were conducted. The analysis of the interviews was done to verify that the policy change processes were consistently the focus of the subject content and embracing contextual factors. To examine the RE curriculum policy change in isolation from its contexts is to use an appropriate lens (Cornbleth, 1990). The analysis was done to ascertain the congruence and incongruence participants' perspectives on the RE subject content, and local (Constitutional related matters) and global contexts. Cornbleth, (1990, p 6) emphasised that curriculum is contextually shaped and its content cannot be understood without attention to the curricular setting.

### **Empirical Framework**

Bowe and Ball with Gold (1992) one of the three sites of policy construction is used in this study to unpack or unravel the construction and reconstruction of the RE curriculum policy changes in Eswatini. The three sites include: the context of influence (where the ideological and political basis of policy is decided by government and powerful groups; the context of text production (where what texts deemed to represent, policy are constructed), and the context of practice (the professionals sites within which policy and policy text are interpreted by teachers) Bowe and Ball with Gold, (1992). These three sites embrace all the targeted population and sampled participants (see Table 5).

The context of influence (where ideological and political basis of policy is decided by government and powerful interest groups) is used to tease out the views of legislators on the construction and reconstruction of RE curriculum policy changes and influence on Eswatini society. The legislators were involved because some once declared that they would challenge the RE curriculum through a motion with the aim of revoking or repealing it.

**Figure 1, Theoretical Framework adopted from Bowe and Ball with Gold (1992)**



In this study Figure one above was used to unravel the contexts of influence site on RE curriculum policy change by unpacking the ideological and political bases of the policy which was decided by government and powerful groups in 2017. The struggles between constitution and social matters which form part of the ideological and political bases of the RE policy change were unravelled. The RE curriculum policy of 2017 provided a conflict –oriented environment because some individuals perceived some peoples’ religious needs, goals and interests to be contradicted by the goals of the state (Kriesberg, 1998). The framework in figure helps to unpack the following:

- the influence of the state control over RE curriculum policy, RE school knowledge production and the nature of historical, ideological and political influence and constraints impinged upon policy change process;
- the relationship between the exercise of power by the state, the selection of curriculum knowledge and its influence on national imperatives.

More attention was paid on how the interaction of the three sites (context of influence, context of production and context of practice) influenced the RE curriculum change policy. More often, than not policies are a product of interaction among and between different sites. Policies are always under continuous interpretation from different sites. The policy change initiative either begins from the professional site or public site or context of influence but it ends with contexts of influence where the ideological and political bases of policy are decided by government and powerful groups. Within the Eswatini context the RE policy change initiative started within the context of influence (where the ideological and political bases of policy were decided by government and powerful groups), and set within the requirement of a prescriptive National Curriculum. With the creation of the RE curriculum policy school students are located within and subjects of a new educational and moral-oriented environment. This notes that the RE curriculum policy is not entirely unplanned or entirely natural. It is focused, framed, and influenced by the political objectives of Eswatini government. The government retains

the power, control of and imposes a type of policies upon the education system. These are intended to, in one respect, to provide knowledge, values which are so important to the nation.

The contexts of influence site its wherevisible and invisible ideological and political ideas influence the nature of the policies. Ideological and political ideas position the policies in a way and the policymakers in particular ways (Ball, 1995; 1990). They orient the provision of education towards certain goals, values. Further they could create patterns of interest for the education system which systematically certain groups of students are excluded and certain values promoted. Countries' curricular are one of the vehicles through which the state attempts are made to spread, market and re-inforce the perceived dominant cultural or religious beliefs (damson and Morris, 1997). In some societies reinforcing the perceived dominant cultural beliefs is achieved through direct political control either visible or invisible (foster, 1999; Cheng-MenLau, 2001). The dominant, cultural beliefs or chosen core official knowledge is selected and structured around specific sets of the country's cultural, socio-economic and ideological aims (Adamson and Morris, 1997).

The contexts of influence shape the context of policy production and the contexts of practice, which involve the policy interpretation and implementation. The policy is always in a state of "attack" and shaped by the systemic interactions among and between these sites (contexts of influence, contexts of production and contexts of practice).The framework in figure 5 facilitated an understanding of the interrelationship between socio-historical, ideological and political influences on the RE curriculum, education system and society.

### **The Targeted Population and Sample**

The targeted population were legislators or Members of parliament (MPS), RE panel members and teachers. They were involved because of their capacity as policymakers and implementers. The involvement of the MPs legislators helps in sheddinglight on the interpretation of policy change and other related matters (Hargreaves, 1993). The involvement of the state or the powerful in the determination of schooling is a multilayered process, in which variations in outlook and interpretations at one level of decision making may frustrate, obstruct, the proposals made at other levels (Halpin, 1990).

Involving MPs, RE panel members and teachers on this policy matter played a crucial role in encouraging a wave of analytical thinking about contextualisation of curriculum knowledge, the schooling system itself and societal needs, despite the current challenging altered social and political circumstances at national and international level. The legislators or Members of parliament (MPS) were relevant because they form part of the contexts of influence, where the ideological and political bases of policy are decided by the powerful individuals in government (see figure 1).

The RE panel members consists mostly of school teachers, curriculum designers, subject Inspectors and Educators from teacher training institutions (see Ministry of Education and Training Religious Education C.B.E Syllabus, 2018).The RE panel members contributed immensely on the re syllabus review process. The RE panel members were involvement helped in providing an insight in appreciating better the extent to which their responses to curricular innovations and changes are more often governed by practical considerations than government long term curriculum concerns and societal concerns. Teachers and RE panel members were relevant because they are part of context of production, where policy texts are produced, reproduced and also professional site or contexts of production, where policy texts are interpreted and implemented (see figure 1).

### **Sampling procedures**

Conducting research on policy matters could be a challenge, given their complexities and peoples' common attitudes of distrust and suspension. The use of convenience sampling and snowball sampling /respondent-driven sampling in policy matters addresses the methodological problems of research conducted in sensitive policy environment. Sensitive policy matters make it difficult to access peoples' thinking and sometimes in enlisting the cooperation of the research population (Cohen and Arieli, 2011). The convenience sampling and snowball sampling /respondent-driven sampling address the fears and mistrust common to sensitive educational policy matters and increases the likelihood or chances of trusting the researcher who is introduced through a trusted social network (Cohen and Arieli, 2011).

Convenience sampling and snowball sampling /respondent-driven sampling were used to sample the participants (see Table 5 Sampled participants). Convenience sampling and snowball sampling /respondent-driven sampling is an approach to sampling design and inference in hard to reach population such as the members of parliament (MPs), drug users, marijuana users and sex workers. The Convenience sampling and snowball sampling /respondent-driven sampling were used because they could begin with the convenience sample of the people from the hard to reach population (Goodman, 2011). In this study the MPs forms part of the hard to reach population.

The Convenience sampling became a spring board for the snowball sampling /respondent-driven sampling. The use of the snowball sampling /respondent-driven sampling was facilitated by the people in the convenience sample who speeded up the selection of others. The convenience sampled MPs or legislators from

the hard to reach population formed the first wave of snowball sampling /respondent-driven sampling and it became a chain. The MPs or legislators selected by the first wave of snowball sampling /respondent-driven sampling form the second wave of snowball sampling /respondent-driven sampling. Then, the MPs or legislators in the second wave selected the others to form the third wave until the expected total number is obtained (see table 5).

The teachers and Curriculum designers were convenience sampling. Their accessibility and convenient place of work were considered (see table 5). The sample did not include enough ethnic diversity, gender and age balance to enhance the debate on the status of the RE curriculum policy. Researchers in incredibly good results in a sub-group analysis, have to be incredibly careful about generalising in them because of different factors. For example, there could be something about the smaller sampled group that could not be true of the larger group and certain segment of the group.

**Table 5 Sampled participants.**

<b>Legislators (MPs)</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Curriculum Designers</b>	<b>Total</b>
18	26	4	48
<b>Total: 18</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>48</b>

**Data gathering**

Gathering data from legislators, subject panel members and teachers broke a new ground by focusing on the institutionalisation of different systems of thought regarding the 2017 RE policy. The data was collected through face to face interviews and telephone one, and semi structured questionnaires. Collection of the data was a challenge because of the Covid 19 pandemic but it became possible after the country moved from level one to level three Covid 19 status, where people were allowed to travel across the country while respecting the Covid 19 World Health Organisation’s guidelines. Most of the legislators were willing to participate in the interview process after they had received the brief introduction and explanation on the research process.

The legislators’ were interviewed in parliament canteen during lunch time and in hotels where they were attending workshops. The interviews ranged between the maximum of 15 -41 minutes per participant because of their tight schedule. The interview process focused on the three key questions: do you think there is a need for a motion to overturn the 2017 RE curriculum policy; in your experience do you think the RE policy was debated among the key stakeholders and in your opinion do you think the policy was initiated to benefit the citizens of Eswatini.

The legislators’ interviews were recorded using smart phones. The interviews gave the interviewer an opportunity to probe the matters for a deeper understanding of the RE change policy and other related complex matters such as violation of the constitution of 2005 by the introduction of this policy in the education system. It helped in unpacking the underlying politics of the policy and the legislators’ individual agendas. The underlying politics form part of the contexts of influence, where the ideological and political bases of policy are decided by the powerful individuals in government.

The semi-structured questionnaires were distributed to individual teachers in a random manner and others were distributed through whatAppa group mode of communication. The participants’ responses were sent through the same platform of communication (whatAppa) and other handdelivered. The participants demonstrated some interest and the culture of enthusiastic in their responses.

**Data presentation**

The data is presented in tables 2 below, and guided by the key questions.

**Table 2 Participants’ responses (Legislators and teachers and RE panel members).**

<b>Legislators’ responses</b>	<b>Teachers and RE panel members’ responses</b>
<p><b>Key question: RE curriculum policy beneficial to society?</b>                      *% represents the number of participants raised their voices on the matter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Benefits:</b>It opened up job opportunities for RE teachers who were unemployed for years;</li> <li>• students are not exposed to variety of religious concepts as per international requirement and Constitution is violated by teaching only Christian values (complex matter because values are the same 4 (22%);</li> <li>• Christian values would <b>find it hard to</b></li> </ul>	<p><b>Key question: RE curriculum policy beneficial to society?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Benefits:</b> moral values can be inculcated through Christianity although even in other religions there are similar values 11 (37%);</li> <li>• It is not of benefit because the curriculum process was undermined by not doing need assessment <b>involving stakeholders</b>, no explanation for the change process, directive was given, dateline given 15 (50%); not debated individual used his powers and authority and wrongfully enforced the change process;</li> </ul>

<p><b>influence society as expected</b> because of <b>massive unregulated opening up of different religious churches</b> with a huge potential of undermining the perceived aim of RE policy-avoiding conflict 2 (11%);</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not benefited society because <b>government's simultaneous commitment to religious freedom as per constitution of 2005 and moral renewal created major tensions and dilemmas and paradoxes in education;</b></li> <li>• <b>Hidden exclusion:</b>Not beneficial it now divides us, or exclude others, the old one allowed children to share different ideas, so no future threats;</li> <li>• The subject should not be compulsory, there should be freedom of choice;</li> <li>• Culture of tolerance could be undermined due to lack of understanding of other religions;</li> <li>• <b>The unfairly debate process</b> of the RE policy-PM and Cabinet overruled-this undermined the policy capabilities to positively influence the society in an inclusive way;</li> <li>• <b>Historical influence;</b> it came as a cabinet decision influenced by the then <b>PM's position and Christian background and King Somhlolo's vision and adoption of Christianity</b> by the royal household in 1836;</li> <li>• <b>RE curriculum policy</b> takes the country back to its historical roots proclaimed by the king-Somhlolo4 (22%);</li> <li>• <b>RE reversal:</b>Christian values also fail to address moral decay in society, <b>priests who claim to be Christians rape and abuse people;</b></li> <li>• <b>The nature of teachers' background, beliefs</b> could influence the teachings-thus promote educational exclusion;</li> <li>• Historical background: The country benefits because <b>it is protected from unknown, we now familiar with Christianity, we can not change, after so many years of Christian culture;</b></li> <li>• <b>RE non -reversal:</b>Government took a perfect decision/stand on the policy, they should join us in this RE curriculum; they should join us in other activities, they loved us and came here;</li> <li>• It benefited the country by taking the interests of the kids at centre. The young ones still <b>needs to be guided</b>, there are still young, later they may choose. Government as parent needs to protect the citizens. Constitution not violated because <b>people still have rights to worship whatever religion they want.</b> While schools deal with curriculum matters, not religious right to worship (what to worship in schools and how to worship not constitutional clarified 2 (11%);</li> <li>• it avoid confusion among the children, others may be taken by the one religion, which may promotes fundamentalism;</li> <li>• Religion should be taken out of schools, be trusted with parents and churches, to avoid questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not benefiting because <b>government allows freedom of associations and practices of different religious beliefs to flourish in the country;</b> the sphere of influence of other religions was overlooked;</li> <li>• We have <b>more churches, ministries</b> than before but there is more moral decay in today's society;</li> <li>• <b>Complex debate:</b> It was <b>debated</b> because the PM could not just do it alone, though eventually imposed without explanation given or recommendation incorporated; no debate was conducted we had a declaration of the policy 6 (20%);</li> <li>• <b>Complex debate residue:</b> Students' <b>exposure to other religions</b> was overlooked-thus society is undermined9 (30%);</li> <li>• Constitution was undermined by <b>depriving the students opportunity to learn other religion-</b> thus the society is not benefiting 9 (30%);</li> <li>• <b>Constitution not violated people are allowed to practice their religions</b>6 (20%);</li> <li>• It benefited because Christianity has the required values –moral values, needed by society as the other religions 7 (23%); it has been always held our society firm for years. It is impossible to maintain your cultural identity and be a Muslim at the same time;</li> <li>• Christianity success depends on how it is taught;Learners are taught about <b>respect, self -control</b>, answers to life challenges-it helps people to get comfort when grieving, enhances peoples' hope for present and future;<b>Enhances Christian practices-</b> which are used in public institutions and functions; parliament-taking oath using the bible, opening official gatherings-through Christian- prayer;</li> <li>• <b>RE non- reversal:</b></li> <li>• It should not be reversed, the country should not be driven by personal agendas of politicians 4(13%); it is the best offer if we do not want our country to turned upside down. There is a link between religion culture and politics. If we want to maintain what we have in terms of culture and politics, then the Christian religion that has always been in place is the best –firstly, it is tolerant of our traditions-though there are few clashes.</li> <li>• Multi-faith undermines peace because some of the other religions are associated with violence 2 (7%);</li> <li>• <b>RE reversal:</b> It should be <b>reversed</b> learners need not to be channelled but made to choose from many types of religions -thus, they have power to defend Christianity;</li> <li>• <b>Reversed;</b> it needs to be overturned learners need to explore different religions and then choose the preferred one. Its problematic to channel learners to one religion 8(27%);</li> <li>• For a long time we have been believing in Swazi traditional religion, Christianity alone can not be defined our religion identity</li> </ul>
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<p>why picking this particular religion;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Constitution violated by indirectly elevating Christianity as the main religion, yet Christianity is not part of the constitution.</b></li> </ul>	
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### III. Discussion Of Results

The discussion of the results is guided by the focus of the study which explores the social construction of the Religious Education curriculum policy of 2017 in Eswatini. The discussion is anchored on theoretical framework (see figure1). The findings of the study revealed that the construction of the RE curriculum was engulfed by different influences from different contexts (context of influence, context of production and context of practice). The interaction of these three sites as depicted on table 2, continued to influence the social construction of the RE curriculum policy for several years even after it was introduced into the education system. The social construction of policies is an ever ending process because it continues to be influenced by the different contexts such as contexts of practice and contexts of influence where the political ideological and political basis of the policy were decided and concluded by the powerful groups in government. The presence of the contexts of influence is captured on this participant’s (MP 1) argument:

*We are preparing motion to reverse this RE curriculum policy of 2017, to be seconded by another colleague. This matter was raised yesterday when dealing a broadcasting bill of 2020. Yes, we will raise the motion because what happen in 2017 was contravening the constitution of 2005 because now it is compulsory so other peoples’ rights are violated. Again, before the content gave them exposure to other religion. And it was not for the benefit of the country but for personal benefits not for society or the country as others claim.*

Individual citizens also continued to challenge the constitutional legality of the RE curriculum policy of 2017, and government’s action on “banning” the teaching of other religions in the school education system and making teaching of Christianity compulsory in schools. Some participants claimed that the ban of other religions in the school system was a violation on students’ constitutional right while others claimed that the country’s constitution is silent on what to be taught on religious subject content. What is clearly pronounced is that the constitution allows all individuals, including students to practice their religion of choice without restrictions but nothing on curriculum matters in school system. The interpretation of the constitution on religious curriculum related matters became complex and revealed the participants’ different perspectives and understanding of the Swaziland constitution of 2005. The different perspectives are observed in this participant argument, where he noted that:

*Constitutional right of students are not violated because people, including the students have a right to worship whatever type of religion they like or choose, but in schools we deal with curriculum matters (MP 5)*

In addition, participants (MP 10) also claimed that:

*the constitution is silent on religious related curriculum matters in our schools. Constitutions usually do not prescribe subject curriculum matters, only educational related policies entertain such matters. Perhaps, what appears as a violation of the Swaziland Constitution of 2005, is that government’s indirectly action or invisible action of making Christianity the main religion, yet constitutionally the country has no main religion or the country is not defined as a Christian country, though it has more Christian believers or followers compared to other religion. The move to make the country a Christian country was removed during the formulation of the constitution in the late 1990s’.*

The data depicted that the social construction of the RE curriculum policy was perceived differently by the participants because of the government’s action of simultaneous commitment to religious freedom as per the Constitution of 2005 and the desire for moral renewal in society, which was characterised by moral decay and these created major tensions and dilemmas and, paradoxes in education and society. These paradoxes are captured in these participant’s arguments:

*The country is benefiting from the RE curriculum policy of 2017 because Christianity has the required values –moral values, needed by society as the other religions, but it has been always held our society firm for years. It is impossible to maintain your cultural identity and be a Muslim at the same time (Teacher 10);  
Learners are taught about respect, self -control, answers to life challenges-*

*it helps people to get comfort when grieving, enhances peoples' hope for present and future (Subject panel member 1).*

*Enhances Christian practices-which are used in public institutions and functions; Inparliament when officials are taking oath they use the bible, opening official gatherings are characterised by Christian- prayer (MP7 ; 15);*

*Government took a perfect decision/stand on the policy, the other people should join us in this RE curriculum; they should also join us in other activities, they loved us and came here (MP 3);*

*The country benefits because it is protected from unknown, we now familiar with Christianity, wecan not change, after so many years of Christian culture;*

*It benefited the country by taking the interests of the kids at centre. The young ones still needs to be guided, there are still young, later they may choose. Government as parent needs to protect the citizens (MP 9).*

The data also indicated that social construction of the 2017 RE curriculum policy was appreciated because of its perceived capabilities to influence society in a positive way but there were some reservations among some professionals and legislators. This is noted in these participants' arguments:

*moral values can be inculcated through Christianity and even in the other religions because they have similar values as Christianity; but might not benefit society because the curriculum process was undermined by not doing need assessment involving stakeholders, no explanation for the change process was given, directive was just given, dateline given, not debated individual used his powers and authority and wrongfully enforced the change process (Subject panel member 4);*

The data has shown that the 2017 RE curriculum policy indirectly introduced the culture of exclusion in a hidden way. This is captured in this participant's argument:

*The unfairly debate process of the RE policy undermined the policy capabilities to positively influence the society in an inclusive way (MP 6);it introduced a culture of hidden exclusion.*

*It now divides us, or exclude others, the old one (multi-faith) allowed children to share different ideas and the subject should not be compulsory, there should be freedom of choice, which could enhance the culture of tolerance, which could be undermined due to lack of understanding of other religions by learners.*

*Not benefiting because government allows freedom of associations and practices of different religious beliefs to flourish in the country; the sphere of influence of other religions was overlooked; Now we have more churches, ministries than before but there is more moral decay in today's society (MP 4).*

The data revealed that the social construction of the 2017 RE curriculum policy was influenced by the Eswatini social contexts and the country's Christian historical background and history of policy formulation in the education system (more often education policies are made through directives). This shown in these participants' arguments:

*The 2017 RE policy curriculum came as a cabinet decision which was influenced by the then PM's position and Christian background and King Somhlolo's vision and, the adoption of Christianity by the royal household in 1836. The 2017*

*RE curriculum policy takes the country back to its Christian historical roots proclaimed by the king-Somhlolo.*

*The state has a responsibility to choose the appropriate the subject matter to ensure that the curriculum speaks the language of society, or based on the perspective analysis of the changes and development in society(moral decay) in which schools must respond to. Government's responses to curriculum were governed by practical problems than pressure groups curricular processes (M P 7).*

The data also revealed that the social construction of the 2017 curriculum policy was received with mixed feelings among the participants because some were calling for its reversal through a motion while others were in support of the status quo. These different sentiments are captured on these participants' voices:

*This policy should not be reversed; the country should not be driven by personal agendas of politicians, it is the best offer if we do not want our country to turned upside down. There is alink between religion culture and politics. If we want to maintain what we have in terms of cultureand politics, then the Christian religion that has*

*always been in place is the best –firstly, it is tolerant of our traditions-though there are few clashes. Multi-faith undermines peace because some of the other religions are associated with violence (Teacher 6).*

*Other participants voiced out their dissatisfaction with RE policy by stating that it should be reversed because learners need not to be channelled but made to choose from many types of religions so may bethey have power to defend Christianity or religion of their choice. It's problematic to channel learners to one religion(MP 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 13, 19, 26); For a longtime we have been believing in Swazi traditional religion, Christianity alone can not be defined as our religion identity.*

#### **IV. Findings**

The study findings indicated that the social construction of the 2017 RE curriculum policy was championed and won on the basis of ideological and political basis of the powerful group in government. These included the Prime minister's office and the Cabinet who overruled in favour of the 2017 RE curriculum because they wanted a curriculum which reflects the values considered important for societal benefits. These include the values of care, love, empathy and compassion. Giroux (1992) noted that state national curriculum is crafted and manufactured to reflect the values considered very important by the powerful groups. These have potential and capability to enforce and re-enforce cultural homogeneity and shared practices. The study revealed that the Christian-oriented historical back ground of the country influenced the social construction of the RE policy. It has been noted that in the past Eswatini were consistently attentive and responsive to the needs of one another. They valued and demonstrated the kinds of caring relationship that reflected a deep capacity for love, compassion and empathy.

The findings of the study indicated that the social construction of the 2017 RE curriculum policy was influenced by different contexts of influence (where ideological and political basis of the policy was decided). The social construction of the policy was embedded on the country's Christian historical ideological thinking and individuals' Christian histories. These factors influenced the social construction of the policy and people's attitudes and breed the culture of resistance towards the RE policy of 2017. Peoples' resistance and division in thinking on this policy were depicted on some legislators' interests and attempt to raise a motion to reverse the policy citing different factors such as the violation of Swaziland Constitution of 2005 section 23 and individuals' personal agendas.

The findings indicated that the social construction of the RE policy was influenced by government common misconception or assumption that what was written on that RE policy would get either taught or learnt and positively influence society. The government overlooked the fact that within the context of educational practice; teachers and students responses to policies may be different from those intended by government. Ball, (1990) noted that policies can be subjected to and influenced by multiplicity of political interpretations and the manner in which the policy received can be interpreted differently because of political inclinations or interests.

The findings revealed that the social construction of the RE policy was partly seen as a mechanistic, devoid of Eswatini contexts because of government's analysis which looked only at structural features (teaching Christian values, discarding other religions influences) and this analysis ignored the underlying web of connections of factors that give meaning to the prevailing socio-economic contexts in which the policy have to be based, crafted and contexts in which the schools operate. The RE policy and the socio-economic contexts were at odds; not complementing each other as expected. The study revealed that this was facilitated by government's action of deleting the other religions from the curriculum while allowing unregulated freedom of associations and practices of different religious beliefs to flourish in the country and overlooking their influence on the teaching of the Christian-oriented RE curriculum. A flourishing, and peaceful society could not be attained by eliminating problems but by focusing on what may connects the people (Ball, 1990).

The findings of the study indicated that the social construction of the RE curriculum was initiated and driven by government with limited involvement of the key stakeholders (teachers, RE subject panel), while in other countries, educational and social change might be prompted by teachers and other pressure groups (Halpin, 1990). This policy was designed and crafted through directives from the Prime minister's office and via the Ministry of Education and training (Ministry of Education and Training Selected Circulars Academic Year, 2017).

The findings indicated that the RE curriculum policy interaction with societal contexts (unregulated freedom of associations and practices of different religious beliefs) and school contexts (teachers' pedagogical practices) influences in complex ways influences the RE social construction. The professionals' site or contexts of practice and school contexts could lead to troubled knowledge or unchallenged knowledge about the other religions, transmitted through different influential agencies: family, church, religious association, and religious



peer groups in society. This makes the RE policy more controversial because it is having difficulties in disrupting the troubled knowledge, toxic knowledge or the unchallenged knowledge, because the core messages of transmission have remained intact (churches of other religions, Muslims, Bahian families and associations). Some of these toxic messages is about religious exclusivity (we belong to ourselves or our religion-Muslims), and messages about supremacy (we are better than the others or them) and messages about religious victimisation (we are being targeted by them because of our religion). From the RE policy stand point, it appears or looks as if these toxic knowledge either does not exist or that by some lucky, putting together students in the same educational space (studying RE curriculum content and making it compulsory) would simply enhance learning for successful societies, despite the toxic or rival knowledge they bring into the learning space or classrooms. This situation threatens the very foundation of the RE policy and of social cohesion in a peaceful society. It demonstrates that RE policy could be perceived as part of a system indirectly designed to shield the children from other kinds of religious knowledge, the knowledge of other peoples' religious practices and toxic knowledge. This was further depicted by government's rapidly and simultaneous commitment to religious freedom as per the Swaziland constitution of 2005 and moral renewal which created major tensions and dilemmas and paradoxes in education. These dilemmas forced some people to remain uncomfortable with the 2017 RE curriculum policy after four years of its existence and advocated for policy reversal through a motion in parliament.

## **V. Conclusion**

The study concluded that the 2017 RE curriculum social construction was anchored on the Christian ideological and political basis of the powerful group in government; acting on the perceived interests of the society. These ideological and political basis made the RE policy to be seen by some as a mechanistic, devoid of Eswatini contexts because of government's analysis which looked only at structural features (teaching Christian values, discarding other religions influences) and paying a lip service to other fundamental pedagogical features and societal influences, which after four years of this policy existence urged armed some legislators to orchestrate a motion to reverse it. The RE curriculum policy made the education system a contested terrain (Arnove, 1995). There was a manifestation of power within the political structures. Which eventually shaped the RE curriculum policy. The RE social construction illustrated the interaction of political dynamics with educational policy, and the complex diverse nature of the interaction. Political dynamics are further illustrated by the participants' claim that the RE curriculum policy of 2017 current status violates the Swaziland Constitution of 2005.

It concluded that the social construction of the RE curriculum policy was initiated and driven by government with limited involvement of the key stakeholders (teachers, RE subject panel members). It was designed and crafted through directives from the Prime minister's office and via the Ministry of Education and training (Ministry of Education and Training Selected Circulars Academic Year, 2017), more often educational changes are initiated through directives. For example, in 2017 about twelve directives were issued by government to facilitate educational programmes. With the 2017 RE curriculum policy the Prime Minister's office was the vanguard of the policy design and implementation. Although, the policy was orchestrated at the Prime Ministers' office but some participants were in favour of the re-introduction of this policy because of their current Christian connections and the country's historical connection with Christianity since 1836.

It may be recommended that the involvement of key stakeholders could be considered in future policy related matters.

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