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# Religious identity, social space, and discourses of religious education reform in Scotland and Malawi: a Bourdieusian analysis

Yonah H. Matemba<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article analyses the complexities of religious identity and stakeholder discourse concerning religious education (RE) reform in Scotland and Malawi. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of 'social space', it explicates the extent to which religious identity and conflicts over symbolic power in the social space of RE reform engender polarised debates imbricated by entrenched ideological positions because agents' discourse in the social space draw on elements of their particular culture, tradition, spiritualities, and theologies. A comparative analysis of qualitative data from Scotland and Malawi reveals stakeholders' reflections, frustrations, and insights on the conflicting nature of religious identity in the discourse of RE reform in a social space where symbolic struggles are inimical to the production of common sense. Despite the data arising from two countries with different socio-cultural contexts—one African and religiously conservative (Malawi), the other European and secular-liberal (Scotland)—the findings reveal similar challenges regarding how agents engage with RE reform in the social space, and the complications that religious identity engenders in that dynamic.

**Keywords** Religious identity · RE reform · Scotland · Malawi · Pierre Bourdieu · Social space

## 1 Introduction

In post-secular liberal societies, religious education (RE) is a contested part of the curriculum, particularly in its attempt to respond to powerful socio-cultural forces in society, such as liberalism, secularism, democracy, multiculturalism, and religious diversity (Horton, 1993; Parker & Freathy, 2011; Skeie, 2001; Wardekker & Miedema, 2001). These forces engender debates on whether RE in public schools should be approached from an exclusivist (single religion/confessional) or inclusivist (phenomenological/non-confessional) position, and for the inclusivist approach, which religions should be studied, why, and how

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(Hobson & Edwards, 1999; Willaime, 2007). In Northern Ireland, Nigeria, Israel, and other countries, where religion remains a polarising factor (Barnes, 2018; Bayim, 2015; Katz, 2018), RE is prone to high levels of conflict (Barnes, 2018). RE is considered a subject that 'leads us paradoxically into the realm of ... uncertainty and truth... cynicism and apathy, faith and commitment' (Wright, 1993, p. 10). It is one of the few curriculum areas not confined to the 'internal dynamics of the classroom or even the school' but is crucially impacted by 'a more complex set of [external] forces, confirmations, disconfirmations, encouragements and discouragements' (Conroy et al., 2013, p. 58).

Despite the variable treatment of RE in schools (Conroy et al., 2013), in countries where RE is part of formal education, its presence in public schools can be attributed to two main reasons. First, the law mandates teaching RE in public schools (Matemba, 2014). Second, RE is a means of preserving cultural heritage, tradition, and identity (Jackson, 2004; Matemba, 2015; Wardekker & Miedema, 2001). In such countries, attempts to bring sweeping curriculum changes in RE engender fierce debates, contestations, and resistance (Parker & Freathy, 2011).

This article examines the social space where RE reforms are debated and negotiated, and analyses, in particular, the role of religious identity in that dynamic. The issue, though well-known, has not received much attention in the discourse, particularly concerning Bourdieu's idea of 'social space' (Bourdieu, 1989), and how this idea can be applied in understanding the inherent complexity of stakeholder micro-politics in the discourse, especially in the context of RE reform in Scotland and Malawi.<sup>1</sup>

To understand the nature of RE reform in Scotland and Malawi as played out in the social space (Bourdieu, 1989), this study addresses several research questions extrapolated from the original research informing the issues analysed in this article.

- Who participates in or is invited to the social space of RE reform in Scotland and Malawi? Which agents (stakeholders) dominate the social space, and why?
- How do social agents representing various interests in the social space self-identify and express their religious identity in discussions about RE?
- To what extent is social agents' religious identity a complicating factor in any discussion relating to RE reform?
- How does religious identity influence the type of RE social agents want for schools, and why?

Answers to these questions shed light on the conflicted social space in which discussions about RE reforms take place, and the outcomes of such debates and their implications for RE school curriculum (see Matemba, 2013).

<sup>1</sup> Here, 'discourse' is defined not only as the ways in which people (i.e. stakeholders) perceive and argue their ontological position but also how they describe their views in communication with others in the social space (both physical and symbolic) regarding the intricate discussions that take place concerning RE as a school subject particularly during curriculum reform.

## 2 Theoretical framework

In addressing the above-mentioned research questions, Bourdieu's concept of 'social space' provides an important analytical lens. Bourdieu defines social space as an abstract structure of symbolic classifications that is expressed by the positionings of and relationships between habituses in the physical or geographical space (Bourdieu, 1989). The social space is not a *physical* community or network, but rather a space of 'theoretical' positions and position-takings in which social actors believe there are things at stake (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013), or as Reed-Danahay (2017) postulates, it is a spatial metaphor for how people are related to each other with respect to the forms of capital they possess.

Bourdieu's habitus is a position in social space; however, individuals participate in multiple fields in which the value of the different forms of capital they possess varies as they attempt to maintain or enhance their position in social space (Bourdieu, 1989, Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). Bourdieu sees social space as an extension of the social world, which presents itself as a symbolic space and is organised according to the logic of difference, of differential distance (Bourdieu, 1989). According to him, social space is connected to physical space through the habitus as a body, which is in a 'place' both physically and socially. In the struggle for the production and imposition of a legitimate vision of the social world, the holders of bureaucratic authority never establish an absolute monopoly, even if they add the authority of science to their bureaucratic authority as governments do (see Reed-Danahay, 2017).

For Bourdieu, the social space presents itself in the form of agents endowed with different properties. These agents are likely to succeed when they '... are closer to each other in the social space [because they belong] ... to the same theoretical class' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 17). Agents are distributed in the social space according to the overall volume and structure of capital (cultural, economic, and symbolic) they possess. In the construction of the social space, the closer the agents, groups, or institutions are within this space, the more common properties they have (Bourdieu, 1989; Reed-Danahay, 2017). People who are close in the social space find themselves close to one another in the geographic space, and therefore belong to the same theoretical class. In the symbolic struggle for the production of common sense or monopoly over legitimate naming, agents put into action the symbolic capital that they have acquired in previous struggles and which they may be juridically guaranteed (Bourdieu, 1989).

There emerges different or even antagonistic points of view in the social space, since an agent's vision of the space depends on his/her position in the space. The means to construct social space and exhibit its structure risk concealing the results they enable one to reach. The groups that must be constructed to *objectivise* the positions they occupy hide in those positions. The issue with the social space is that its construction is not carried out in a vacuum, but is subjected to structural constraints (see Reed-Danahay, 2017). The social world is perceived and expressed in different ways, under the plurality of visions of the world, but at the same time provides a base for symbolic struggles over the power to produce and to impose the legitimate vision of the world (Bourdieu, 1989). Symbolic relations of power tend to reproduce and reinforce the power relations that constitute the structure of social space. The social space tends to function as a symbolic space, a space of lifestyles and status groups characterised by different lifestyles (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013).

In any society, conflicts between symbolic powers aim at imposing the visions of legitimate divisions at constructing groups, which often works 'through dualist oppositions ... high/low [and] strong/weak' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 22). According to Bourdieu, struggles for

dominance in social space can be connected to strategies for occupying physical space, for example, RE in the physical space of the curriculum and classroom discourse. Connected to social space is the concept of ‘symbolic power’ as something that is ‘world-making’ involving ‘separating’ and ‘reuniting, often in the same operation’ (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 22). For Bourdieu, to change the world, one has to change the ways of ‘world-making’—that is, the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). Given the complexities of religious identity and the entrenched ideological positions it engenders among agents (e.g. stakeholders: policy actors, teachers, parents, and religious groups) in the social space, Bourdieu’s ideas about ‘struggles’ (symbolic and field) inform us why discussions about RE are confrontational, protracted, and inward looking. I argue that this happens because in the social space various ‘agents’ are locked in a perpetual struggle for monopoly over what each thinks should be the *legitimate* vision of RE in schools.

### 3 Extant literature on RE as a safe/unsafe educational space

Religion-fuelled violence (Baker & Reyes, 2020) worldwide has drawn attention to attuning RE as a safe space—in both confessional and non-confessional settings—to facilitate dialogue between people with different religious and ideological positions in the social space (Lockley-Scott, 2019), even if the subject matter ‘... involves material that is difficult for pupils to relate to or embrace’ (Berglund, 2020, p. 140). As such, RE (as a contested pedagogical space) creates ‘... a certain kind of openness and safe space in which to broach conflicting feelings and interpretations’ (Hess, 2001, p. 287). This, however, does not imply that RE should involve uncritical classroom dialogue, rather it should facilitate an exchange of informed views leading even to constructive disagreement (Miller & McKenna, 2011; O’Grady & Jackson, 2020). Berglund (2020) suggests that RE should be a ‘brave space’ because discussion on religious matters ‘... entails the risk that one may be called upon to put her/his beliefs or opinions on the line’ (p. 141). Flensner and Von der Lippe (2019) have advised that to avoid giving students a distorted impression of the RE classroom being safe, it is necessary to make them see this as a space of disagreements ‘... since disagreements exist and are part of life’ (p. 275).

In understanding RE as a safe/unsafe space, the role of the teacher (with appropriate specialist knowledge and facilitation skills) is important considering the unpredictable nature of classroom discourse on religious topics (see O’Grady & Jackson, 2020). Teachers are crucial in facilitating RE as a safe space because ‘without committed religious educators combating hate ... and creating the conditions for the next generation to thrive ... [the fears of the child]... may be more real than we care to acknowledge’ (Baker & Reyes, 2020, p. 8). If managed ineffectively, the RE classroom can create an unsafe space (Carlsson, 2020), which can leave ‘... students feeling that aspects of their personal lives are being exposed, resulting in a feeling of insecurity, shame or of being pushed too far emotionally’ (Johannessen & Skeie, 2019, p. 267).

Of equal contestation is the issue of religious identity,<sup>2</sup> not least because identity construction involves selection/deselection, posturing, self-preservation, and religious

<sup>2</sup> Religious identity can be understood as the degree to which individuals self-identify on religious grounds.

behaviour such as lifestyle choices and religious commitment (see Coşgel & Minkler, 2004; Hopkins, 2011; Jeldtoft, 2011; Seul, 1999; Panjwani & Moulin-Stožek, 2017).

According to Duderija (2008), religious identity construction takes into account the self-other dialectic and notions of difference. Religious identity is borne out of an individual or group's affinity to a particular religion and the importance they place on that identity compared to their other identities (i.e. 'identity salience') (see Phalet et al., 2010). Religious identities tend to be stable, although individuals can alter identities, shed old identities, take on new ones, and even rearrange their hierarchy of identities (Peek, 2005). Religious identity does not assume religiousness per se, although for some individuals, religiosity may be defined or ascribed (Kunovich & Hodson, 1999; Raj, 2000; Panjwani & Moulin-Stožek, 2017).

Religious identity and conflict are issues widely debated in discourse (see Agbiboa, 2013; Kunovich & Hodson, 1999; Seul, 1999). As a socio-cultural force, religion is a powerful form of identity (Balkin et al., 2009; Dollinger, 2001), and may explain why religious groups, specifically their adherents, prefer particular forms of RE (confessional RE) as a means of promoting their identity through education (Matemba, 2013; Zine, 2001). Several studies have explored the specific connection between religious identity, cultural change, and RE (Grant, 1997; Wardekker & Miedema, 2001). Religious identity is considered an important marker that allows religious communities to draw on elements of their tradition and theology as a means of self-understanding and self-expression (Cohen-Zada, 2006). Other studies see faith-based schools as another significant marker of identity for parents wishing to preserve their children's religious identity (Bertram-Troost et al., 2009).

Note that in its attempt to understand religious identity, the post-modern era has produced two irreconcilable epistemological stances for RE pedagogy: confessionalism and liberalism. Confessionalism is wary of liberalism and sees religious pluralism as an issue to deal with (Horton, 1993), whereas liberalism sees confessionalism as going back to a time that has long passed its relevance, thus perceiving religious diversity as something to be wholly welcomed and embraced (White, 2004). This evident tension makes it imperative for the modern RE curriculum to carefully negotiate between these 'antagonistic' positions, thus making it a contested area of the curriculum. Religious groups see particular forms of RE (i.e. confessional RE) as a means of promoting their particular identity and as a site of resistance to the onslaught of post-modern secular forces against religion, while those with a liberal view of education may have little religious feeling for the subject (Hobson & Edwards, 1999; McKinney, 2006).

Discussions about RE in the social space, including debates around curriculum reforms, engender protracted debates centred mainly on which religious identity dominates the curriculum (see Matemba, 2013). Attempting to adjust RE to these ideals of common citizenship, national governments tend to prefer non-confessional multi-faith RE (Barnes, 2009). Conservative elements in society view the *liberalisation* of RE with disdain, feeling concerned that learners will be 'deprived of their cultural heritage' (Jackson, 2004, p. 30). Tensions therefore arise when a nation-state tries to impose its substantive *liberal* values over the more traditional values in the formulation of curriculum policy for RE (Bertram-Troost et al., 2009; Hobson & Edwards, 1999). Consequently, attempts to *touch* RE become embroiled in the micro-politics of the curriculum among contending stakeholders whose identity (religious or liberal) should be promoted in the RE curriculum (Aleksov, 2004; Cohen-Zada, 2006; Filispono, 2005; Skeie, 2001).

Discussions about RE in the social space also touch on the politics of religion. This is rooted in the fact that throughout history, religion and politics have shared an *intimate* and often *complex* relationship. For better or worse, this relationship has had a powerful effect

on people's perception of reality, particularly how this affects the manner in which people of faith make decisions. Skeie (1995) explains that a religious group's internal politics may involve others within the religion with contrasting perspectives regarding state policies. This becomes even more problematic when religious people take an active interest in external or worldly politics, and try to promote their version of reality (e.g. values, ethos) because those who adhere to different or no faiths often become critical of the version of reality created by the dominant religion (see Skeie, 1995).

Another related issue is that, at times, political activities are at odds with some of the views religious people hold. The association between religion, terrorism, and world politics illustrates the complexity of the problem. The spate of terrorist incidents since 9/11 (New York) have made Western societies, in particular, pay closer attention to issues of cultural identity, political Islam, and the danger that religious confrontation and *instrumentalisation* of religion for political purposes can engender (Jackson, 2004; Willaime, 2007). Another consequence of the religion-politics nexus is the politicisation of religion within a formal national framework, for example, the recognition of a particular religion by a nation-state (e.g. Ireland) (Barnes, 2018). Sometimes, a politically induced ideological war erupts between the modern nation-state and traditional elements within society (Skeie, 2001). A problem arises when the nation-state desires to push forward into education the liberal democratic values (such as respect for others, objectivity, freedom of opinion, rule of law, tolerance) of its political framework (Banks, 1979). Therefore, when attempting to attune RE to these ideals of common citizenship, non-confessional RE tends to be preferred over historical approaches such as confessionalism (Barnes, 2006).

On the other hand, conservative elements in society who naturally prefer the *status quo*, view 'liberalisation' of RE with disdain because for them such a development poses a 'real' challenge to the historical and traditional ways of holding their beliefs and other values. While the modern nation-state may embrace a liberal stance for its heterogeneous population, certain sections of society may view this stance as arbitrary, even bordering on political harassment, against their particular values and cultural way of life (Nussbaum, 1997). In such situations, discussions about RE become embroiled in the micro-politics of RE as a school subject among the various contending stakeholders (Aleksov, 2004; Filisponne, 2005).

The protracted nature of the ensuing negotiations and compromises sometimes produce unpredictable outcomes, such as the creation of dual or multiple parallel syllabi in a single national curriculum framework for RE (Matemba, 2013). Debates concerning the theory or practice of RE have, in recent decades, become volatile issues of public discussion, sometimes occurring in highly politicised arenas such as government offices, Houses of Parliament, and the media (Rudge, 1998). In the wake of the 1988 Education Reform Act in England and Wales, for example, RE generated intense and protracted political debate in the House of Commons (Alves, 1991).

The Act ultimately did not recommend any substantial changes to RE beyond reaffirming the tenets of the 1944 Act, such as the provision of the 'agreed syllabus system' and primacy of Christianity in the subject as recognition of the UK's religious identity based on a Christian tradition. This signifies that, in the UK, Christianity is privileged in RE, following what is commonly known as a neo-confessional approach. Thus, despite the rhetoric of treating *all* religions equally in post-confessional educational policy of the UK, Christianity remains *primus inter pares* in RE, even in state non-denominational schools (see Conroy et al., 2013; Matemba, 2015).

Curriculum reform in RE has become a popular topic of public debate in the media. Although television and radio broadcasts carry reports on such issues, it is usually the print

and internet media where such debates linger for much longer. For example, in post-Soviet Estonia, the debate over a new direction for RE attracted media attention for 10 weeks in the summer of 2003 and became the most vividly discussed educational question in newspapers and the internet during that time (Valk, 2007). However, media reporting on such reforms tends to be superficial, focusing only on those elements that are seen as politically controversial or make tabloid news. In some instances, media reporting on religious issues is fraught with bias in an attempt to preserve the *status quo* against a particular curriculum change to RE (see Glascock et al., 2008).

## 4 Contexts and methods

The choice of Scotland and Malawi as sites for this research was influenced by two key factors: the researcher's familiarity with the two countries (at personal, academic, and professional levels), and the historical links they share. Born in Malawi, the researcher has a personal experience of the country. He completed his primary and secondary education there, and after initial teacher training, taught RE in a secondary school for several years. After moving to Scotland more than 17 years ago, he became familiar with the country. There, he completed advanced degrees in RE, then taught RE in secondary schools before moving to teaching RE in teacher education.

Further, both Scotland and Malawi have a historical connection stretching back to the 1850s following David Livingstone's (a famous Scottish explorer) travels in present-day Malawi, sparking off fervent missionary work by Scottish Presbyterian Churches from 1873 onwards (see Lamba, 1999; Ross, 2013). In 2005, this connection was formalised when Scotland and Malawi signed a cooperation agreement (see Enslin & Hedge, 2010). Scottish missionaries were the first to introduce Western education in Malawi through the schools they built (modelled on Scottish education), some of which exist to this day (Ross, 2013). In the early days of missionary work, Scottish mission schools in Malawi offered a curriculum that mirrored the typical Scottish curriculum (Matemba, 2014). Until 1929, when the colonial government introduced a uniform curriculum (Lamba, 1999), RE in Scottish mission schools was similar to the program offered in Scottish non-denominational public schools (Matemba, 2014).

In Scotland and Malawi, RE is the core area of study at school. In both countries, curriculum changes in RE have attempted to re-attune the subject with contemporary trends such as liberalism, multiculturalism, and religious diversity (see Conroy et al., 2013). Another rationale for comparing Scotland and Malawi relates to similarities in their religious demography. In both countries, Christianity is the dominant religion, and Islam is the largest minority religion (Table 1). Further, both are countries impacted by modernity or post-modernity to varying degrees, although with different outcomes. In both countries, these global forces necessitated the need to reform the RE curriculum (Table 2). RE reforms last took place in 2009–2010 and the 2000s in Scotland and Malawi, respectively. These reforms were the subject of the investigation, whose findings are reported in this article.

This article draws on research findings from a large qualitative study (completed in 2011) that explored curriculum developments in RE between Scotland and Malawi, focusing on developments, stakeholder engagement (resistance, negotiation, and compromise), and future directions for the subject. In both countries, the researcher collected data involving key stakeholders who provided reflective perspectives on several issues related to RE

**Table 1** Religious Demography: Scotland and Malawi (2015)

Scotland		Malawi	
<i>Christianity</i>	49.3% (< 4.5%)	Christianity	81.4% (< 1.2%)
Church of Scotland (27.5%)		Roman Catholic (18.5%)	
Roman Catholic (14.5%)	< 1.4%	CCAP (15.5%)	
Other Christian groups (7.3%)		Anglican (1.9%)	
		SDA/SDB (5.6%)	
		Other Christian groups (39.9%)	
Islam	1.7% (> 0.3%)	Islam	13.4% (> 0.4%)
<i>Other religions</i>	1.6% (> 0.5%)	Other Religions	0.8% (< 1.1%)
Judaism		Buddhism	
Buddhism		Sikhism	
Hindusim		Baha'i	
Sikhism		Judaism	
Other beliefs		Rastafarianism	
		African Traditional Religion	
<i>Don't know (new category)</i>	0.8%	N/A	N/A
None	46.6% (> 9.9%)	None	4.4% (> 1.9%)
Total	100%		100%

CCAP Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, SDA/SDB Seventh-Day Adventist/Seventh-Day Baptist

curriculum development. The stakeholders were people and organisations with a *vested* interest in RE as a school subject and thus were keen to ensure that their *voice* was heard in any discussion on future direction of the subject. While in any country, these stakeholders may come from different organisations (religious, professional, educational, political, government, and civil society), and as such capture different and often polarising views of what they want and do not want for RE, 'they are all present in the exercise of shaping RE' (Conroy et al., 2013, p. 58). As someone with a lived experience of both Malawi and Scotland, and a professional involvement with RE, the researcher had *insider* knowledge to be able to identify key stakeholders (see Table 3)—education officials, headteachers, RE teachers, lecturers in RE, and representatives of professional bodies, religions, and school parent councils (Singleton et al., 1993).

The ethics committee of the researcher's university gave ethical approval to undertake this research. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth face-to-face interviews. To fill gaps in the narratives, and capture policy ambitions and curriculum expectations, documents including government reports, policy guidelines, curriculum (i.e. syllabi), official letters, communiqués, and minutes of meetings were used. The researcher conducted fieldwork in Scotland and Malawi (2008–2011). In Scotland, the study coincided with the introduction of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) program between 2009 (primary education) and 2010 (secondary education), and as such stakeholders reflected mainly on the previous RE curriculum, and where relevant on CfE. Letters of formal requests for participation in the study were sent to 80 (40 each in Scotland and Malawi) key stakeholders (individuals and institutions), achieving a good response rate of 76.25%. The interviews involved a purposive sample of 61 participants, 26 in Scotland and 35 in Malawi (Table 3). Students were not involved in this study because, overall, the research was concerned with policy and curriculum developments, not specific classroom issues involving learners.

The researcher carried out the lengthy process of conducting interviews at different locations in the two countries. On average, each interview lasted one hour and a half,

**Table 2** Journey to RE Reform in Scotland and Malawi (1972–2010)

Scotland		Malawi	
1972	First critical official report (Millar Report) on RE published, signalling the need for reform in RE	1974	Efforts by churches to adopt East African BK syllabus fail to win government support
1981	Law governing RE amended to allow assessment in the subject for the first time	1982	First revision of BK syllabus. In secondary schools, BK was made an elective subject
1984	First ever national examination in RE introduced in schools	1987	Multi-faith RE introduced in teacher training colleges but not in schools
1991	Curricular, legal, and policy framework changes introduced (Circular 6/91) to facilitate reforms towards multi-faith RE	1991	BK in primary schools replaced with RME. No stakeholder contestation
1992	New (multi-faith) RME program introduced in non-denominational schools (5–14 Curriculum)	2000	BK in secondary schools replaced with RME
1994	New RE program introduced in Catholic schools (5–14 Curriculum)	2000–2001	RE in secondary schools suspended due to stakeholder contestation
2009/10	3–18 'Curriculum for Excellence' RE program for Catholic and non-denominational schools introduced, first in primary and a year later in secondary	2001	Dual syllabus system introduced allowing both BK and RME to be offered in secondary schools
		2006	New BK program for secondary schools developed but due to lack of resources until now not implemented

*BK* Bible knowledge, *RME* Religious and moral education, *RE* Religious education

**Table 3** Interview Participants ( $n=61$ )

Designation	Scotland	Malawi
Education officials	2 (1 M and 1 F)	2 (1 M and 1 F)
Religious leaders	Muslim (1) M Roman Catholic (1) M Presbyterian (Church of Scotland) (1) M Jewish (1) M	Muslim (4) M Roman Catholic (1) M CCAP (1) M SDA (1) M
Parents	2 F	5 (3 M and 2 F)
Teachers	7 M	11 (2 F and 9 M)
Headteachers	4 M	6 M
Lecturers	6 M	3 M
Leaders of professional bodies	1 M	1 M
Total	26	35

CCAP Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, SDA Seventh-Day Adventist, F Female ( $n=8$ ), M Male ( $n=53$ )

and with consent, a digital voice recorder was used to capture the data. Participants' anonymity was protected in the reporting of the data by using unidentifiable codes, such as 'Malawian religious leader 1', 'Scottish parent council member 2', and so on (Singleton et al., 1993).

Grounded Theory (GT) was the preferred research method as it fitted well with the study aim to explore how key stakeholders in Scotland and Malawi engage with RE (Straus & Corbin, 1998). The style of this method requires creativity, closeness to participants, and immersion in the field. As such, the researcher paid close attention to the dynamics of fieldwork so as to respond appropriately to emerging situations which, if not handled well, could potentially derail the research process in the field (Straus & Corbin, 1998). Following the GT protocols, data collection and analysis were integrated at every stage of the research process to ensure that every step of data collection could be fed into the analysis. Besides the analysis of official documents and related materials, these observations provided an additional set of data, ensuring rigour and consistency of the findings through a process of confirmation and re-examination of contradictory viewpoints.

As is common with most qualitative methods such as phenomenology, case study, and ethnography, one limitation of GT is that it can be reductive in its search for general patterns, and therefore data tend to lose contextual uniqueness. By triangulating the data with observations and documentary materials, this limitation was minimised (Singleton et al., 1993). Another limitation relates to gender disparity because most of the study participants were male ( $n=53$ , 86.9%) compared with only a few women ( $n=8$ , 13.1%) (Table 3). Given that *religion* was the main subject of investigation, patriarchal exigencies can possibly explain the gender difference (Collett & Lizardo, 2009). Through the three-pronged process undertaken for data analysis (read/reading transcripts, sorting/coding of emergent themes, and cross-country comparisons of themes and issues) (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), the study identified national and supranational comparisons on how religious identity complicates stakeholders' thinking and understanding of RE, and the ways in which they communicate this in the social space of RE reform (see Bråten, 2015).

A critical examination of the data would indicate supranational processes at work related to how stakeholders in Scotland and Malawi engage with the question of religious identity in RE, and the educational, social (secularisation and pluralisation), and geopolitical (globalisation, multiculturalism, and democratisation) factors that influence cross-country processes of comparative RE (Bråten, 2015). The supranational comparisons so captured back the view that despite socio-cultural differences, similarities exist between issues that ‘underpin the micro-politics of RE reform in transnational contexts’, including the influence religious identity has on these contested debates (Matemba, 2013, p. 366). The original study revealed several issues regarding how agents in Scotland and Malawi engage with RE reform in the social space and how that engagement influences RE. Bourdieu’s idea of ‘social spaces’ sheds light on three inter-related issues analysed in this article. The first issue concerns how the selection of agents in the social space complicates the intractable nature of RE reform. Second, it discusses the extent to which self-identification and religious posturing polarise social space, and even further these reforms. Finally, the implications of this dynamic for the (re)construction of RE curricula in both countries are considered.

#### 4.1 Who participates in or is invited to the social space of RE reform

While Bourdieu’s concept of ‘social space’ acknowledges the role of agents, it does not explain how these agents are to be identified and invited to the social space. The present study found that participation in or invitation to the social space of RE reform in Scotland and Malawi related to those involved in stakeholder consultation. Regarding consultation, most stakeholders claimed that they were not consulted or were ‘consulted’ after the core decisions about curriculum changes had already been made by the government, and others were merely invited to rubber-stamp the suggested reforms.

In both countries, policy actors (i.e. government agents) were positive in their view that they consulted widely on these reforms, while non-government stakeholders responded differently. Thus, the issue of consultation was a hotly contested one regarding RE reform in Scotland and Malawi. The issue revolved around several points of disagreement. Government respondents were quick to say that all relevant stakeholders were consulted during the reform process, as noted below:

The development of new syllabi was carried out with the full consultation, mostly of faith groups, so that in future they would not say we do not want this because we were not consulted (Education official in Malawi 2).

In Scotland, respondents representing the government gave a similar positive response to the effect that consultation was properly carried out with key stakeholders. Educational official in Scotland 1 noted:

In terms of consultation, there is a list of groups that are always consulted, such as churches and parent bodies. The drafts of the curriculum were always circulated to all schools for comments.

However, non-government key stakeholders in both countries rejected the government’s optimistic view and stated that consultation was either absent or wholly ineffective. In Malawi, most respondents revealed that the government reformed RE without consulting them and then imposed a new syllabus on schools to teach RE. One respondent noted:

Consultation was not performed on the ground. That is why there was conflict between religious groups because RE touched on religion. Muslims and Christians argued. Adequate consultation did not take place to determine whether people wanted to change. The government just unilaterally changed the syllabus (Headteacher at a public school in Malawi 2).

Parents involved in the research also expressed a similar view of not being consulted on the reforms. One parent observed:

We heard about this issue on the radio and through newspapers, but we as parents in villages were never consulted. Perhaps the issue started with the president and the government did not bother to consult people in the villages. We were outside the circle of interest of the government over this issue (Chairperson of a parent council in Malawi 1).

In Malawi, Catholic and Presbyterian churches were left out in the crucial initial stages of the consultation process. Some respondents alleged that the government merely hand-picked people in their personal capacity and later claimed that they were chosen because they belonged to a variety of denominations. For example, representatives of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi said:

The government lies about this issue. No consultation took place with us. What happens is that the government asks Christians who work in the Ministry of Education and not the church office. However, when they write, they say that they consulted all the churches when in fact they did not. If you look at the names of the people on the panel, you would not see any official church representative. We expected to see the names of the general secretary, the synod moderator of the CCAP [Presbyterian Church] or the bishop [Catholic Church], but if the names that appear are only those of education officials who happen to be our members, how can that be consultation? The government did not visit the offices. We just found that the syllabus had changed.

As expressed by some respondents in Malawi, by pre-selecting certain individuals in the social space (based on the overall capital), the government was perhaps signalling its apprehension that the changes in RE would be unpopular. The government was seeking to consult with like-minded people (i.e. 'belonging to the same theoretical class') as they would offer little objection to the proposed reforms and merely help reproduce and reinforce the hegemonic ideological positions dominating the social space. After all, as Bourdieu explains, the struggles for dominance in the social space are connected to struggles in the physical space, in this case the struggles between secular liberalism and religious faith (particularly Catholic) in Scotland, and the struggles for social, political, and religious dominance between Christianity and Islam in Malawi. The issue of curriculum technocrats choosing 'like-minded' people when it comes to educational reform also surfaces in the relevant literature. Kent and Kay (2010) suggest that curriculum change fails because concerned officials subconsciously surround themselves with people who provide a buffer against alternative views.

The above excerpts show that, in Scotland, 'selective' consultation was applied, that is, during curriculum reforms, the government invited only selected religious organisations (e.g. Presbyterian and Catholic) and professional bodies to the social space of RE reform, but curiously left out others like Muslim and Jewish leadership. While in Malawi, Islamic leadership was invited to the social space of RE reform, including the alleged 'like-minded' people identified by the respondents. Notably in 2000–2001, Malawi had a Muslim

president<sup>3</sup> who initiated multi-faith RE that included materials from Islam. During this new curriculum reform, Muslims were invited for consultation in great numbers to the chagrin of Christian leadership. In later reforms (2006), Muslims would express similar sentiments that their leadership was not invited to the discussions (i.e. ‘social space’) because they now did not have political leverage under the leadership of a Christian president.

#### 4.2 Self-identification and religious posturing in the social space of RE reform

Identity salience is powerful in that it helps people recognise factors that make a particular identity of paramount importance (Phalet et al., 2010). For many respondents in the two countries, religious identity was a powerful signifier in their self-identification and religious posturing in the social space (see also Panjwani & Moulin-Stožek, 2017). Several respondents, including education officials, teachers, lecturers, and parents ( $n=24$ , 39.3%) were comfortable (without probing or being required) in declaring their religious affiliation and position.

In Malawi, some teachers considered it their duty to ensure that RE did not compromise the *truth* about Christianity. Others were at a loss as to why their Christian president—a Presbyterian who recently converted to Catholicism—(from 2004) did not intervene in the social space of the reforms to ensure that Christianity remained the only religion of study in schools. One respondent wondered ‘... how a Christian president could sell us to Muslims who use [religious and moral education] RME to Islamise the country and project their *identity* in a Christian country?’ (Malawian RE teacher 3). Similarly, in Scotland, a participant’s (Scottish parent council member 2) self-declaration (without probing) as a Catholic married to a Protestant provides insights into a *split* identity of sorts, in a country with a historical sectarian divide between Catholics and Protestants, morphing as rivalry between Celtic (Catholic) and Rangers (Protestants) football teams persists (see Lloyd & Robinson, 2011).

Some Scottish headteachers in non-denominational schools were open about their Christian faith and reported that in addition to regular RME, they also run conferences for their students on themes such as the ‘role of faith in Scotland’s educational system’. One respondent explained:

There are others like myself who are committed to the Christian faith. The problem in Scotland is that only the staff in Catholic schools can declare their faith position, while staff in other schools cannot. I know Christian headteachers who are beginning to promote the Christian faith through CfE under the scope of the new curriculum (Scottish headteacher 4).

Despite the veneer of ‘secular’ education in non-denominational schools in Scotland, the reality is much more complex. The findings suggest that there is a small but active Christian group of headteachers in such schools that is pushing for a greater recognition of Christianity as a marker of identity through RE.

<sup>3</sup> This was the first and to date the only time Malawi had a Muslim president. All the other five presidents since independence in 1964 have been Christians.

### 4.3 Compromise and exclusion as outcomes of RE reform in social space

In both Scotland and Malawi, the politically charged and intractable discussions about RE, especially those related to curriculum reforms, have produced the unintended consequence of having a parallel syllabus system for RE (i.e. the particularist approach of RE). The adoption of a particularist approach<sup>4</sup> came about as a way of addressing specific stakeholder concerns over non-negotiable issues, particularly the connection stakeholders make between religious identity and the preferred RE program of study. In Malawi, particularly regarding RME vis-à-vis Bible knowledge, the government sought to resolve the conundrum by adopting a *dual* curriculum system for RE. In a communiqué to stakeholders, the Secretary for Education in Malawi stated:

The consultative committee finally resolved that revised RME and Bible knowledge be offered as optional subjects in government, grant-aided, and private schools, and that all schools shall observe the right of the student/learner and/or indeed of his parent to choose the religious instruction subject of his/her choice, as provided by the Constitution of the Republic of Malawi and the Education Act (Malawi Government, 2001, p. 1).

In Scotland, the tussle over RE reform emerged in the mid-1990s with the proposal to introduce a phenomenological RME as a single curriculum for all public schools (Catholic and non-denominational) in the place of a *dual* curriculum (1918 Act) that catered to the specific needs of children in different sectors of state-funded education (Conroy, 2014; Matemba, 2014). The Catholic Church rejected the proposal, arguing that the government had not respected statutory arrangements, which historically allowed the church to determine RE content for its schools (SOCC, 1994). After intense discussions with the church hierarchy, the idea was abandoned and RE reverted to the original dual arrangement. Stating that Catholic schools are *Christocentric* and *Trinitarian*, the church explained that RME was unacceptable because it lacked a *faith dimension* and gave too much credence to other religions. Regarding the more recent CfE reforms (2009–2010), initial stakeholder reflections indicated that the Catholic Church took a more proactive approach engaging the government in the earliest stages of developing a draft RE curriculum in which a Catholic identity was firmly embedded (Table 2), as the following excerpts illustrate:

The Catholic Church in Scotland tended to be reactive, not proactive. This time, the church has become slightly more proactive regarding RE reform (Scottish education official 2).

The difference this time is that, at the start of the [CfE] reform process, we went to the government and said: ‘let us not make the same mistake and wait until the draft guidelines are published and then say we have a problem’. So, from the very start, there was need to have a particular RE curriculum for Catholic schools (Scottish Catholic Church representative).

In both countries, debates about RE in the social space have had unintended consequences of the *dual* curriculum arrangement in an effort to satisfy stakeholder demands in areas of non-compromise about the core aims of RE (i.e. multicultural liberalism vis-à-vis

<sup>4</sup> This is an approach or arrangement for RE curriculum where two or more single-faith RE programs/syllabi are offered simultaneously to satisfy confessional aims of different religious (competing) communities (see Matemba, 2021).

confessional particularism). While having different RE programs provides choice, in the long term, this may lead to *exclusivism* in which children from different or no religious background are denied the opportunity to embrace difference and learn from each other's experiences in a common curriculum space (Matemba, 2013). If RE can claim to have a citizen agenda in inculcating common values (Jackson, 2004), learning together and not separately would best fulfil the ideals of contemporary education.

## 5 Discussion and analysis

As Bourdieu & Wacquant (2013) has demonstrated, social space construction is impacted by contextual factors in the social world, such as liberalism, democratisation, and greater recognition of cultural and religious heterogeneity. These structural imperatives re-organise the social space according to the 'logic of difference' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 20). In Scotland and Malawi, the social space where discussions about RE take place is dominated by liberal-secular ideas of education as a way to provide an *educational* justification for RE. Attempting to attune RE to the ideals of common citizenship in a liberal society, non-confessional RE tends to be preferred over historical approaches such as confessionalism (Barnes & Wright, 2006).

Given that social space is also connected to inequality and social domination (Reed-Danahay, 2017), discussions and debates about RE have become a hotly contested issue because of concerns of some groups about losing their religious identity, as explained in Sect. 3. Conservative elements in society who favour the *status quo*, dislike 'liberalisation' of RE because for them such a development challenges the historical and traditional ways of holding their religious identity and related values in education. Tensions arise when the nation-state tries to impose its substantive values (with its own inherent biases) over the more traditional or cultural values in the formulation of curriculum policy for RE (see Hobson & Edwards, 1999).

The government's liberal stance toward RE in Scotland and Malawi is viewed as arbitrary, even bordering on political harassment, by the citizens. The developments in Scotland and Malawi illustrate that discussions about RE in social space become embroiled in the micro-politics of policy and curriculum-making among the various contending stakeholders. Such discussions are complex and conflicted because agents in the social space are in a 'symbolic struggle for monopoly over legitimate naming' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 17) based on the strength of the capital they possess. As in the case of this study, certain agents (e.g. government officials and religious leaders) accumulate capital, which enhances their symbolic power. Consequently, these agents become assertive and even aggressive in promoting their distinct identities or the religious identities they present in the social space (see Skeie, 2001). This conundrum makes it difficult for the various agents to reach a common understanding in discussions about RE reform.

As stated by a respondent in Scotland, the euphemism 'can something be said about us?' captures a particular mood of frustration felt by some social agents who see pedagogical shifts in RE (from confessional to non-dogmatic pluralism) as a dis-empowering process that robs them of their religious identity. The issues of cultural heritage, tradition, and history have conditioned many stakeholders to desire a *status quo* so that RE only focuses on the country's 'folk' religion through which their religious identity can be preserved and propagated in public education. However, other agents welcome discussions about RE because such debates open up the possibility of change so that previously marginalised

identities and religious voices are recognised, promoted, and preserved in a new vision of RE. Recasting the question as ‘can something be written about us?’ one sees the potential for a much needed dialogue for inclusion and rethinking how best multiple religious voices can share a common space in RE but in creative (and sensitive) ways which ensure that the identities of different religions occupy a shared space in public education. Admittedly, this is not an easy task because at the supranational level, Christian hegemony seems to reign supreme, as has been the case even historically in both Scotland and Malawi.

## 6 Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the *battle* for religious identity through RE emerges when, in the struggle for dominance in social space (Bourdieu, 1989), assertive religious groups like Islam (in Malawi) or Catholicism (in Scotland) begin to challenge marginalisation and demand inclusion in the common educational ‘space’. It also demonstrates the extent to which the symbolic power stakeholders have in the social space translates into tangible outcomes in the ‘physical space’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013), not only in the manner in which those with accumulated capital negotiate (and dominate) discussions about RE (e.g. religious groups due to the strength of their religious identity and school ownership) but also, importantly, the direction RE takes and curriculum outcomes that emerge. Bourdieu’s (1989) idea of the social space as ‘separating’ but also ‘re-uniting’ (p. 22) offers glimpses of the social space as an envisioned *safe* zone for RE, or even better, as a ‘community of disagreement’, being a ‘... group with identity claims... who find themselves engaged in a common process, in order to solve shared problems or challenges’ (Iversen, 2019, p. 324).

If we accept the potential of the social space as a positive and brave space (Berglund, 2020; Lockley-Scott, 2019; O’Grady & Jackson, 2020), discourse about RE reform in that space can accommodate (rather than hinder) different or no religious identities in formulating a curriculum framework that supports inclusive RE (Foley et al., 2020). Issues related to religious identity in RE are complex and fraught with antagonistic positionings as to whose identity is influential. Consequently, discussions about RE in the social space will always demand a careful balancing act and necessary compromises with implications for policymaking, curriculum outcomes, and classroom discourse on RE.

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