



An Investigation into Teachers' Attitudes to Religious Education in North Macedonia Primary Schools

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Abstract

Religious Education (RE) in North Macedonia holds a significant place in the country's diverse educational landscape, reflecting the coexistence of various faiths within this Balkan nation. This paper aims to investigate teachers' attitudes toward the impact of Religious Education on students' behavior, knowledge, and attitudes, considering factors like gender and school type. The study involved 217 primary school teachers from multiethnic regions in North Macedonia. The Teachers' Attitude Questionnaire (TAQ) was employed for data collection. The findings provide insights into teachers' perspectives on the effects of RE. Overall, teachers express positive attitudes towards RE, with a notable percentage acknowledging its positive influence on students' attitudes towards various aspects of diversity. However, there is variability in opinions regarding its impact on students' sense of responsibility and behavior. Teachers also diverge in their views on its role in moral development and tolerance promotion. Regarding demographic factors, there is no statistically significant difference in teachers' attitudes based on gender. However, teachers in multicultural schools exhibit notably more positive attitudes compared to their counterparts in monocultural schools, suggesting that school environment and diversity play a role in shaping perceptions of Religious Education.

Keywords: diversity, religious education, secularism, teacher attitudes

1. Introduction

Renewed interest in religion is particularly evident in the context of Europe, where Europeanization processes and dynamics are influencing national systems of education. In Europe, various initiatives contribute to a nuanced understanding of Religious Education (RE). The EU-sponsored project REDCO, centered on the value of religion and religious education for 14 to 16-year-olds, was conducted in eight European countries. It explored whether religion is a source of stereotypes and conflicts or a catalyst for dialogue and peaceful coexistence. A key finding revealed that students, regardless of their religious stance, express interest in learning about religions in school and aspire to peaceful coexistence across religious differences (Schreiner, 2013). The University of Vienna organized another research project where a team of researchers proposed a 12-question catalogue as a framework for articles on how religious education was organized and taught in European schools. The initial volume of a planned six-book series focused on the situation of religious education in Central Europe (Jäggle et al., 2013).

Religious education in North Macedonia should hold a significant place within the country's educational framework, reflecting the diverse religious landscape that characterizes this Balkan nation. North Macedonia is a land where various faiths coexist almost harmoniously. Challenges in inter-religious relations have been reported as a permanent phenomenon (Ceka, 2018; 2019; Pajaziti, 2019), while efforts have been made to promote interfaith dialogue (Mojzes, 2017; Çupi, 2019). Religious education might play a pivotal role in fostering respect and understanding among citizens from various religious backgrounds. According to the results of the Census in 2021, regarding religious affiliation, 46.14% of the resident population in the country identified as Orthodox Christians, 32.17% as Muslims, 0.37% as Catholics, and 13.21% were categorized separately as "Christians" (Census, 2021). Given this multifaceted religious mosaic, the importance of religious education cannot be overstated. It serves as a means to promote interfaith dialogue, nurture social cohesion, and ensure that individuals from different religious backgrounds coexist in a spirit of mutual respect. The curriculum of religious education in North Macedonia should be designed to provide students with knowledge about various faiths and belief systems, instilling in them a sense of openness and acceptance towards different religious traditions. The 2007 Law on Primary Education formalized the inclusion of religious education as an optional subject in public schools, emphasizing tolerance and respect for religious diversity. The subject was named Religious Education and was taught by clerics, while the curriculum was designed to promote the values of religions, but separately from each other. The students were divided on a religious basis. This law was repealed by the Constitutional Court with the justification that it violates the secularism of the state.

Since 2010, RE in the Republic of Macedonia has been implemented through the elective subject "Ethics in Religions" or "Introduction to Religions." These subjects are tailored to the age of the children. The topics covered are age-appropriate, making it easy for them to grasp (Koceva & Petrovski, 2015). In summary, North Macedonia has made efforts to establish religious education within its diverse educational landscape, with a focus on maintaining a balance between respecting religious diversity and fostering tolerance. However, the process has been marked by ongoing debates and challenges related to curriculum and implementation. Therefore, the aim of the research was to investigate the impact of RE on students' attitudes and behavior from the perspective of the teacher.

2. Literature Review

The term "religion" can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices that relate to supernatural beings and are intended to organize and define the environment in which the religious community operates (Gaitanos, 2019). Halstead et al. (2015) define religious education as the endeavor to instill religious beliefs in young individuals and to perpetuate those beliefs by transmitting them from one generation to the next. The origins of education activities with a religious basis are a question mentioned in the past, but one that continues to this day. The changes that have occurred in the field of education in recent years have led to the strengthening of secularization (Koceva, 2017). Many European countries have seen a decline in the numbers indicating an official religious affiliation and a decrease in the practice of faith by individuals and groups. Smyth et al. (2013) refer to this process as "secularization," but this is a contested concept and may reveal important complex aspects of people's cultural attachment and engagement with organized religion. In this sense, the transmission and expansion of the principles and methods of religious education should be accompanied by an understanding and application of these methods (Alberts, 2010). The TRES research network, comprising faculties from 26 European countries, explored teaching religion within academic theology and religious studies (Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009). Comparative studies among RE teachers revealed methodological convergence. The conceptual differences between "teaching religion," "teaching about religion," and "teaching from religion" were found less relevant for teachers and their practices (Schweitzer et al., 2009).

Ene and Barna (2015) caution that it is particularly important to examine to whom this education will be directed and how it will be implemented, for what purpose and at what level, as well as the functionalization of theories related to these themes that constitute a distinct dimension of this issue. Hannam et al. (2020) emphasize the critical elements of education, including setting goals, addressing educational issues, organizing teaching environments, selecting methods, determining resources, and specifying evaluation approaches. Therefore, RE is a discipline that, from one aspect, deals with the inclusion of children and youth in the social and cultural world of the young, first in a religious and then in a moral context, as well as ensuring their harmony in this environment. In this regard, activities related to the cultural and social life of adults, as well as the participation of youth and children, are considered essential to religious upbringing.

Education helps us understand an individual's life in society. Conroy et al. (2013) argue that this activity, together with the physical development of the individual, empowers intellectual, moral, spiritual, and mental maturation. The adoption of principles and their application prepares the individual for the future. According to Gholami et al. (2011), self-confidence, independent decision-making, and the development of a sense of responsibility as a result of education play a significant role in shaping awareness and in the development of one's personality. Education is recognized as a social factor that influences an individual's attitudes and behavior, and it strives to enable children to adopt their own perspectives, concepts, and behaviors that children cannot achieve on their own (Kimanen, 2015). From this perspective, through educational institutions, generations acquire knowledge about the core characteristics of a society, knowledge and experiences, art, and craftsmanship, as organized institutional methods of the respective institutions. Green (2021) argues that schools exert significant influence in setting desired standards, being crucial institutions for shaping individuals into ideal citizens. These educational settings play a key role in developing the human potential essential for the continuous existence of

the state. Religious education at this point, besides meeting personal needs, also educates people suited for the development of the state.

The practices of religious education within an educational system depend on the state and the changes it plans to implement. To avoid indoctrination, Haynes (2001) suggests several principles that schools should adhere to when implementing religious education:

- The school's approach to religion should be academic, not devotional.
- Schools should aim to raise students' awareness of religions but should not pressure them to accept any particular religion.
- Schools should sponsor the learning about religion, not the practice of faith.
- Schools should expose students to different religious perspectives and viewpoints but should not favor or highlight any specific one.
- In schools, instruction should encompass all religions, neither promoting nor undermining any particular faith.
- Schools should inform students about various beliefs without requiring them to adhere to any specific belief.

These principles promote a balanced and objective approach to religious education that respects individual freedom of belief and ensures a comprehensive understanding of different religions. Starting from the mentioned principles for organizing religious education in schools, it is easy to conclude that in a multicultural school, different principles cannot be applied than those mentioned. This is simply because a school that is multi-confessional by default is also multicultural. As for whether the teaching of religious education in schools will foster tolerance and pluralism or intolerance and interfaith hatred among students, such thoughts reflect a lack of knowledge about the theory and practice of education for tolerance. In fact, according to Conroy et al. (2013), education for tolerance is inseparably linked with pluralism, encompassing a wide range of worldviews and personal characteristics.

The teaching of Religious Education, while providing the option for those who do not belong to any religion to opt-out, can contribute to the development of pluralism through religious self-awareness and a deeper understanding of the process of self-identification in the younger generation. A NCCA (2017) research revealed that most European countries provide Religious Education in public schools. Several research projects in Europe show that young people highly appraise the place of Religious Education and want to learn and talk about their own and others' religions, beliefs, and truth claims in schools. In this regard, the Council of Europe has increasingly looked to Religious Education as a means of promoting intercultural understanding and respect for diverse beliefs (NCCA, 2017). A Meehan and Laffan (2021) study showed that "67% of participants felt that RE should be a state-examined subject in second-level schools and 64% said that RE should be a mandatory subject in both Junior and Senior Cycle" (p. 444). About 70% of participants highlighted knowledge and understanding of religions/worldviews as a main goal of teaching Religious Education while the formation of attitudes and values (tolerance, respect, and acceptance) was the main goal of nearly 50% of teachers. According to Meehan and Laffan (2021) in rapidly secularising societies, those who continue to practice any religion are vulnerable to bullying. Ipgrave (2012) warns that in these settings, religious adolescents risk social exclusion while Weisse (2011) points out that some religiously committed students feel vulnerable in the classroom.

According to Koceva and Petrovski (2015), some North Macedonian teachers point out positive feelings of tolerance that have developed among students of different religious backgrounds after the implementation of subjects such as Ethics of Religions or Introduction to Religions. However, the impact of these subjects on tolerance and society as a whole should only be the subject of research. We should wait for several generations to emerge from the school system that has studied these subjects. For the purposes of this research, we posed a research question: What impact do gender and school type (multicultural or monocultural) have on the attitudes of North Macedonian primary school teachers regarding the effects of Religious Education on students' behavior, knowledge, and attitudes?

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Participants

A quantitative research design was adopted. The study involved 217 North Macedonian primary school teachers from multiethnic regions. Out of the participants, 59 were male and 158 were female. 154 working in Monocultural schools and 63 working in Multicultural schools. In the context of the Republic of North Macedonia, a monocultural school refers to a school where only students of one ethnicity are enrolled, and the teaching process is conducted exclusively in one language, such as Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, or Bosnian.

3.2. Instruments

A Teachers' Attitude Questionnaire (TAQ) with 17 questions, adapted from Githaiga (2003) and Meehan & Laffan (2021), was used for data collection. The questionnaire was translated into Albanian and Macedonian. Closed-ended questions were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree). The questionnaire's internal consistency coefficient is 0.73, which is considered acceptable. Githaiga (2003) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.76.

3.3. Data Analysis

In cooperation with the school principals, a link containing a Google form questionnaire was sent to 350 primary school teachers. Finally, 217 complete responses were collected, so the valid response rate was 62%. Collected data were input into SPSS v. 25 software. To test the TAQ reliability, Cronbach's Alpha was used. Descriptive statistics procedures were used in data processing to determine descriptive characteristics, and the t-test was performed to determine the significance of the differences.

4. Results

Teachers have expressed that Religious Education has an impact on students' behavior, knowledge, and attitudes. Thus, 58.5%, 44.3%, 47.5%, and 44.2% affirm that RE positively influences students' attitudes toward: those of different faiths, those of different nationalities, those of different races, and those who speak different languages, respectively. On the other hand, around 1/3 of teachers disagree that RE engenders these effects. 47.5% of teachers stated that RE enhances a student's sense of responsibility toward others, 63% believe that RE positively influences a student's behavior within the family environment, promoting altruism, love, and respect, and 67.8% think that RE positively contributes to a student's moral development and spiritual sensitivity. A significant percentage of 39.6% do not agree that RE positively enhances a student's sense of responsibility toward others, while 27% believe that RE has no impact on

shaping a student's behavior within the family environment and on contributing to a student's moral development and spiritual sensitivity.

Roughly 45% of teachers affirm that RE contributes to a student's understanding of democratic values and human rights, 56.7% agree or strongly agree that RE promotes understanding and tolerance toward others with differing beliefs or thoughts, enabling them to gain a broader perspective on the world of faith and culture, while 67.7% have stated that RE prevents the influence of radical tendencies among students. More than 1 in 3 teachers (37.6%) do not agree that RE contributes to a student's understanding of democratic values and human rights, while 1 in 4 teachers (27.2%) disagrees that RE promotes understanding and tolerance toward others with differing beliefs or thoughts.

The majority of teachers (53.9%) expressed that RE assists in distinguishing accurate information from false or fabricated information, 50.7% believe that RE helps guide students away from harmful habits like smoking, gambling, drug addiction, and others, while 69.6% affirm that RE affects students' sensitivity to social issues such as corruption, injustice, and illegal income. On the other hand, 1 in 5 teachers (20.2%) disagree that RE aids in discerning accurate information from false information, while around 30% of teachers do not think that RE helps deter students from detrimental habits. A very high percentage of teachers, 78.8% and 67.7%, respectively, affirm that RE positively promotes students' embrace of national values and cultural values. Likewise, at very high percentages of 63.6% and 71%, teachers stated that RE influences the development of a sense of duty towards the homeland, the nation, and the world, as well as positively enhancing awareness of topics such as the environment, ecological balance, and cleanliness.

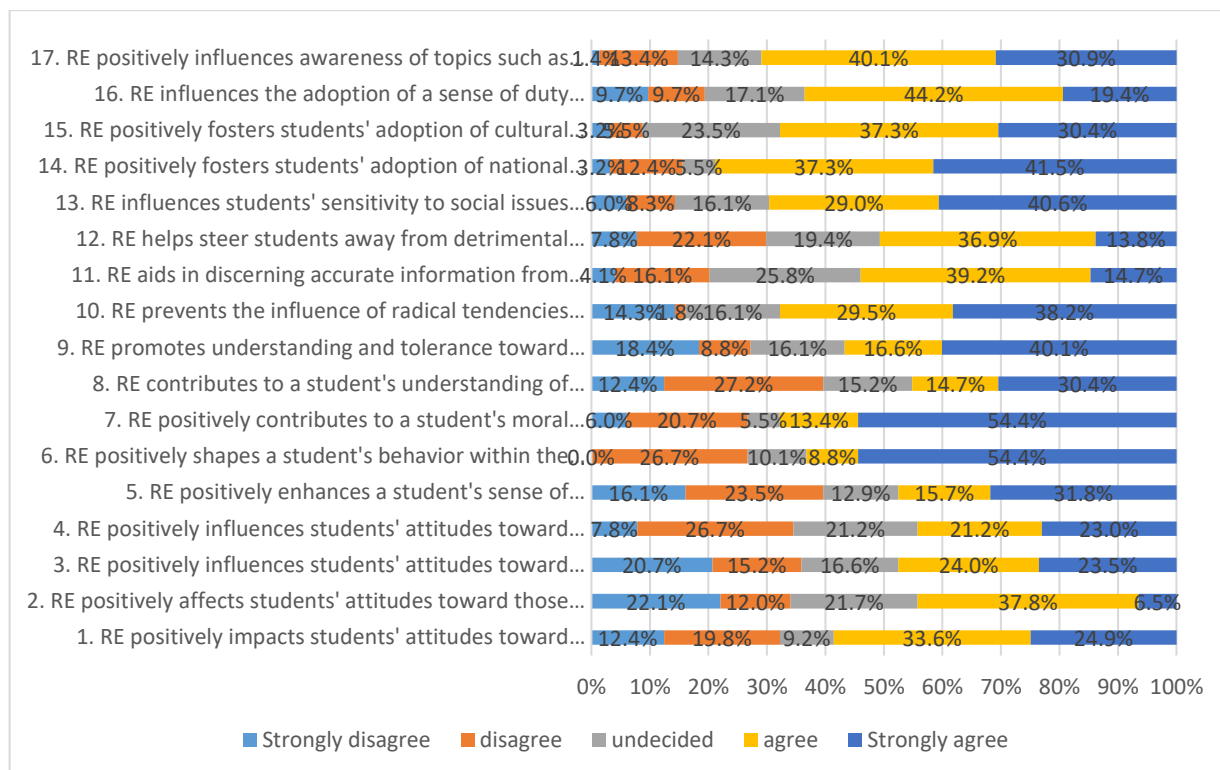


Figure 1. Teachers' views on the effects of Religious Education (RE) on students' behavior, knowledge, and attitudes

Teachers expressed uncertainty on several questions. Thus, 21.70% are unsure whether RE positively affects students' attitudes toward those of different nationalities, while 21.20% are undecided about whether RE positively influences students' attitudes toward those who speak different languages. One in four teachers (25.8%) have reservations about whether RE aids in distinguishing accurate information from false or fabricated information, while one in five teachers (19.4%) have doubts about whether RE helps deter students from harmful habits like smoking, gambling, drug addiction, and others. Approximately 23% of teachers were undecided about whether RE positively encourages students to adopt cultural values.

When it comes to teachers' attitudes towards the effect of RE on students' behavior, knowledge, and attitudes, by gender, the test results indicated that there is no statistically significant difference among the teachers (Table 1). Female teachers had slightly more positive attitudes (M=3.57) towards the impact of RE on students' perspectives, compared to male teachers (M=3.45).

Table 1. T-test on teachers' attitudes towards the effect of RE on students' behavior, knowledge, and attitudes, by gender

	Female (N=158)		Male (N=59)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Teachers' attitudes	3.57	.600	3.45	.426	1.355	.177

When it comes to teachers' attitudes towards the effect of RE on students' behavior, knowledge, and attitudes, by school type, the test results showed that there is a statistically significant difference among the teachers (Table 2). Teachers working in multicultural schools had more positive attitudes (M=3.71) towards the impact of RE on students' perspectives, compared to teachers working in monocultural schools (M=3.47).

Table 2. t-test for teachers' attitudes towards the effect of RE on students' behavior, knowledge, and attitudes, according to the school type

	Monocultural school (N=154)		Multicultural school (N=63)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Teachers' attitudes	3.47	.545	3.71	.563	-2.940	.004*

*p<0.05

5. Discussion

Generally, teachers express positive attitudes towards Religious Education (RE) and the effects of RE on students' behavior, knowledge, and attitudes. Similarly, the study by Meehan & Laffan (2021) has shown that "RE teachers are positive about the provision of RE in second-level schools and agree that it should continue to be provided" (p. 448). This study was designed to investigate teachers' attitudes towards the impact of RE on students' behavior, knowledge, and attitudes, considering demographic factors such as gender and school type. The results of the study, as presented Figure 1, Table 1 and Table 2, provide valuable insights into teachers' perspectives on the effects of RE in the classroom. A notable percentage of teachers, ranging from 44.2% to 58.5%, acknowledge that RE has a positive influence on students' attitudes toward

various aspects, such as different faiths, nationalities, races, and languages. This suggests that many educators believe that RE fosters understanding, respect and tolerance among students, promoting a broader perspective on diversity. The main goals of teaching include the formation of attitudes such as tolerance and respect, along with the knowledge and understanding of religious traditions and the non-religious interpretation of life (Meehan & Laffan, 2021).

Teachers widely believe that RE affects students' sensitivity to social issues, such as corruption and injustice. Additionally, a high percentage asserts that RE positively promotes students' embrace of national and cultural values. These findings indicate that educators see RE as a tool for instilling both ethical awareness and a strong cultural identity. These results do not differ significantly from the findings of studies conducted by NCCA (2017), NCCA (2019), Byrne and Sweetman (2019), as well as the perspectives of the Council of Europe.

It is important to note that teachers express uncertainties and reservations on several questions, ranging from the impact of RE on attitudes toward different nationalities and languages to its influence on discerning accurate information and deterring harmful habits. These uncertainties reflect the complexity of assessing the multifaceted effects of RE in the classroom. In their assessment, Vilà Baños et al. (2020) found that head teachers exhibited moderate favorability towards cultural and religious diversity. They were even more strongly favorable towards interreligious dialogue. However, their support diminished notably when it came to endorsing education playing a major role in managing cultural and religious diversity and fostering interreligious dialogue.

Regarding gender differences, the study found that there was no statistically significant difference in teachers' attitudes towards the impact of RE on students' behavior, knowledge, and attitudes. However, it is noteworthy that female teachers exhibited slightly more positive attitudes ($M=3.57$) compared to male teachers ($M=3.45$). This result aligns with prior research (Davies, 2004; Saoke et al., 2023; Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007; Bećirović et al., 2018.) suggesting that gender can play a role in educators' perceptions and teaching approaches. While the difference observed here may not be statistically significant, it hints at a potential trend worth exploring further. In contrast, when considering school type, the study revealed a significant statistical difference in teachers' attitudes. Teachers working in multicultural schools had notably more positive attitudes ($M=3.71$) towards the effects of RE on students, compared to their counterparts in monocultural schools ($M=3.47$). Vilà Baños et al. (2020) found statistically significant differences between head teachers who saw their school as having wide cultural diversity and those who did not, in terms of their attitudes towards intercultural and interreligious dialogue and in the scale total, demonstrating that those who perceived wide cultural diversity were those who scored least in intercultural and interreligious dialogue (p. 7). This finding raises intriguing questions about the impact of school diversity and the teaching environment on teachers' perceptions of the role of RE in shaping students' behavior, knowledge, and attitudes. One possible explanation for this difference could be the varied experiences and challenges faced by educators in multicultural versus monocultural settings. In this context, several studies have investigated the challenges of implementing RE in diverse settings (Everington et al., 2014; Joshi et al., 2005; Putkonen & Poulter, 2023; Sargeant & Berkner, 2015). Teachers in multicultural schools may be more accustomed to navigating diverse perspectives and cultural backgrounds among their students, which could influence their belief in the positive effects of RE in promoting understanding and tolerance.

Furthermore, Gholami et al.'s (2011) study underscores the importance of recognizing the broader educational context when interpreting teachers' attitudes toward RE. Factors such as curriculum design, teaching methods, and classroom dynamics can all influence how teachers perceive the effectiveness of RE in achieving its intended outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into teachers' attitudes toward the impact of RE on students' behavior, knowledge, and attitudes. While gender differences appear subtle, the influence of school type stands out as a significant factor in shaping teachers' perceptions. Future research may delve deeper into the specific mechanisms that underlie these differences, helping to inform curriculum development and teacher training in RE. While there is a prevalent positive outlook, teachers' opinions vary significantly on specific aspects. Many recognize the subject's potential to cultivate tolerance, respect, and understanding among students. This underscores the belief that RE plays a crucial role in fostering open-mindedness and embracing diversity within the country's multicultural context. However, there is also a notable divergence of opinion, especially regarding its impact on students' sense of responsibility, behavior within the family environment, and moral development. They suggest that more research and dialogue are needed to understand how best to harness the subject's potential for positive influence while addressing concerns and reservations. Gender differences in teachers' attitudes were subtle but noteworthy, with female teachers tending to hold slightly more positive views. This observation aligns with existing research and hints at the potential role of gender in shaping teachers' perceptions and teaching approaches. While the difference may not be statistically significant, it suggests an area worth exploring further in future studies. The most significant disparity in attitudes was found based on school type. Teachers in multicultural schools exhibited notably more positive attitudes towards RE compared to their counterparts in monocultural schools. This finding raises intriguing questions about the impact of school diversity and the teaching environment on teachers' perspectives. It suggests that educators in multicultural settings may be more accustomed to navigating diverse perspectives and cultural backgrounds among their students, leading to a more optimistic view of RE's role in promoting understanding and tolerance. In light of these findings, it is crucial to consider the broader educational context, including curriculum design, teaching methods, and classroom dynamics, when interpreting teachers' attitudes towards RE. Furthermore, ongoing research and dialogue among educators, policymakers, and stakeholders are essential to harness the full potential of RE as a tool for fostering tolerance, respect, and interfaith understanding in North Macedonia's diverse society.

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