

Religious Education and the Crisis of Moral Formation in Ghanaian Schools: Negotiating Ethics, Pluralism, and Social Responsibility

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ABSTRACT:

Background: Religious education remains an integral component of Ghana's educational system through Religious and Moral Education (RME), which is intended to promote ethical values, discipline, tolerance, and responsible citizenship among students. However, increasing concerns regarding indiscipline, dishonesty, intolerance, and moral decline among students have raised critical questions about the actual effectiveness of religious education in shaping moral behaviour within contemporary Ghanaian schools.

Aims: This study aims to examine the influence of religious education on moral development in Ghanaian schools by exploring how moral values are taught, interpreted, and practiced within diverse educational contexts.

Methods: The study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design involving selected public and faith-based schools in Ghana. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document analysis involving teachers, students, school administrators, and religious leaders. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis through coding, categorization, and theme development procedures.

Results: The findings indicate that religious education contributes significantly to the promotion of honesty, respect, discipline, responsibility, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence among students. Interactive teaching approaches such as discussions, storytelling, and reflective dialogue were found to strengthen students' moral reasoning and ethical awareness. Nevertheless, challenges including doctrinal bias, exam-oriented teaching, inadequate teacher preparation, and limited critical engagement reduce the effectiveness of moral instruction in some schools.

Conclusion: Religious education continues to play an important role in moral formation and social cohesion in Ghanaian schools. However, its effectiveness depends on inclusive pedagogy, critical reflection, balanced curriculum implementation, and sensitivity toward religious diversity within contemporary educational environments.

Keywords: Religious Education; Moral Development; Religious and Moral Education; Ethical Citizenship; Interfaith Learning; Moral Formation; Religious Pluralism; Ghanaian Schools.

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INTRODUCTION

The question of whether religious education genuinely contributes to moral development has become increasingly controversial within contemporary educational discourse. In many societies, schools continue to experience growing concerns related to student indiscipline, dishonesty, violence, intolerance, cyber misconduct, and declining respect for social norms despite the continued presence of moral and religious instruction in formal curricula. Scholars have argued that this contradiction reflects a widening gap between ethical knowledge and moral behaviour among young people in modern educational settings (Buchanan et al., 2022; DeTienne et al., 2021; Kubota, 2020). In African contexts, where religion traditionally functions as a central moral institution, this situation has generated renewed debates regarding the effectiveness of religious education in shaping responsible citizenship and ethical consciousness (Mohorić et al., 2023; Saada, 2023). Ghana, in particular, presents a unique socio-cultural landscape in which religion continues to influence political discourse, family structures, communal relationships, and educational values (Mensah, 2025). Religious and Moral Education (RME) therefore occupies a strategic place within the national curriculum as a mechanism for transmitting ethical values and promoting social harmony (Tawiah et al., 2025). However, the persistence of moral challenges among students raises critical concerns regarding whether religious education is achieving its intended objectives in practice. This controversy has intensified academic interest in understanding how moral values are actually taught, internalized, and practiced within school environments today.

Recent empirical observations within Ghanaian schools reveal increasing anxiety among educators, parents, and policymakers concerning the moral behaviour of students. Reports of examination malpractice, disrespect toward authority, bullying, substance abuse, academic dishonesty, and peer violence continue to attract public attention across different educational levels (Japheth Abdulazeez et al., 2024; Sulyman-Gidado & Salimon, 2025). These behavioural concerns have often been interpreted as indicators of broader moral decline within contemporary society, particularly among younger generations exposed to rapid social transformation and digital influences. At the same time, Ghanaian schools remain highly religious spaces where prayers, religious assemblies, and moral instruction are embedded in institutional routines (Tawiah et al., 2025). This creates a paradoxical situation in which strong religious visibility coexists with persistent ethical challenges among students. Some scholars attribute this condition to the increasingly formalistic nature of religious education, where memorization of doctrinal content receives greater emphasis than reflective moral engagement and ethical application (Moulin-Stožek & Metcalfe, 2020; Osagie, 2025). Others argue that wider socio-economic pressures, media exposure, and changing family dynamics have weakened traditional systems of moral socialization, thereby reducing the influence of school-based religious instruction (Margareth & Sitorus, 2025). Consequently, understanding the actual influence of religious education on students' moral development has become an important educational and societal concern within Ghana.

The urgency of this issue extends beyond individual student behaviour to broader questions of national development and social cohesion. Moral development plays a critical role in shaping civic responsibility, peaceful coexistence, ethical leadership, and democratic participation within multicultural societies. In Ghana's pluralistic environment, where Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion coexist, schools function as important spaces for cultivating tolerance, mutual respect, and interfaith understanding among young people. Religious education therefore carries

expectations not only of personal moral transformation but also of promoting social stability and national unity (Amin, 2024; Juthi et al., 2025; Maidugu & Isah, 2024). Nevertheless, contemporary educational realities increasingly challenge these expectations. Growing exposure to global media cultures, ideological polarization, and digital communication platforms has transformed the moral experiences of students in ways that traditional educational approaches may no longer adequately address (Ge & Fu, 2025; Liu, 2025; Xiong, 2026). Furthermore, concerns have emerged regarding doctrinal bias, exclusionary pedagogies, and insufficient engagement with critical thinking within some forms of religious instruction. If religious education is expected to contribute meaningfully to ethical development in contemporary society, then its effectiveness must be critically examined within actual school contexts rather than assumed theoretically. This makes the present study both timely and socially significant.

The importance of investigating religious education within Ghanaian schools is further reinforced by the need to contextualize moral development within African philosophical traditions and educational realities. Much of the dominant literature on moral education has historically been shaped by Western psychological theories that emphasize individual reasoning and universal moral stages (Bentahila et al., 2021; Krettenauer, 2021). Although these frameworks remain influential, they often inadequately capture the communal, relational, and spiritual dimensions that characterize African understandings of morality (Metz, 2021). In many African societies, morality is closely connected to social responsibility, communal harmony, respect for elders, and spiritual accountability. Religious education within Ghana therefore cannot be fully understood solely through individualistic models of ethical reasoning. Instead, it must be analyzed within the broader socio-cultural structures that shape students' identities, behaviours, and interpersonal relationships. Additionally, Ghanaian schools are increasingly characterized by religious diversity, requiring educational approaches that balance faith-based moral instruction with inclusivity and pluralistic engagement. Examining how religious education operates within these complex realities is essential for developing more culturally responsive and educationally effective approaches to moral formation.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined the relationship between religion, morality, and education across various global contexts. Several studies have concluded that religious education contributes positively to students' ethical awareness, social responsibility, empathy, discipline, and interpersonal respect (Hussam, 2025; Kholidah, 2022; Lumbantobing & Sihombing, 2025). Research conducted in African educational settings similarly emphasizes the role of Religious and Moral Education in promoting communal values, civic consciousness, and peaceful coexistence among learners (Muhammad & Lawal, 2025; Obizue et al., 2025). Other scholars have highlighted the importance of interfaith education in reducing prejudice and strengthening tolerance within multicultural schools (Turnip, 2025). Studies focusing on Ghanaian schools have additionally reported that religious education encourages moral reflection and reinforces socially accepted behavioural norms among students (Mensah et al., 2025; Tawiah et al., 2025). Beyond the African context, contemporary research has also explored how learner-centered pedagogies, ethical dialogue, and reflective teaching practices can strengthen moral reasoning and character development within religious education classrooms (Odipo, 2025; Sangwa, 2025). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that religious education continues to occupy an important place within discussions of ethical development and values formation in schools.

Despite these contributions, much of the existing literature remains characterized by several conceptual and methodological limitations. First, many studies continue to approach religious education from normative or theological perspectives that assume its moral effectiveness without critically examining students' lived experiences and behavioural realities. Second, empirical investigations often focus primarily on curriculum content while giving limited attention to classroom interaction, pedagogical strategies, institutional culture, and interfaith dynamics that shape moral learning processes. Third, several studies rely heavily on quantitative surveys that measure attitudes statistically but fail to capture the deeper meanings, interpretations, and negotiations through which students internalize moral values in everyday school environments (Bročić & Miles, 2021). In the Ghanaian context specifically, relatively few qualitative studies have explored how students, teachers, and religious actors collectively experience and interpret the moral functions of religious education within pluralistic schools. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the tensions between doctrinal instruction, critical thinking, and inclusivity in morally diverse educational settings. Existing discussions also insufficiently integrate African communal moral philosophy with contemporary debates on religious pluralism and educational practice. As a result, important dimensions of moral development within Ghanaian schools remain underexplored.

Another significant gap within the literature concerns the limited contextual analysis of how religious diversity influences moral education in contemporary African schools. While previous research frequently acknowledges the coexistence of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion in Ghana, fewer studies critically examine how this plurality affects students' ethical interactions, classroom experiences, and perceptions of moral authority. In addition, earlier studies rarely investigate how institutional conditions such as teacher preparation, curriculum implementation, classroom climate, and school culture mediate the effectiveness of religious education. The dominance of generalized discussions has often obscured the everyday complexities through which moral values are negotiated within actual educational settings. Moreover, the growing influence of digital media, globalization, and changing youth cultures has transformed moral socialization processes in ways that earlier frameworks may no longer adequately explain (Osgerby, 2020). Consequently, there remains a need for contextually grounded and empirically rich research capable of critically examining both the potentials and limitations of religious education within contemporary Ghanaian schools. Addressing this gap is necessary for developing more inclusive, reflective, and socially responsive approaches to moral education in pluralistic societies.

Based on these concerns, this study aims to examine the influence of religious education on moral development within Ghanaian schools by exploring how moral values are taught, interpreted, and practiced across diverse educational contexts. Specifically, the study investigates the moral principles emphasized within Religious and Moral Education, the pedagogical approaches employed in moral instruction, the role of religious diversity in shaping students' ethical experiences, and the institutional challenges affecting the effectiveness of religious education. The study contributes theoretically by integrating moral development theory with African communal moral philosophy and perspectives on religious pluralism to provide a more contextualized understanding of ethical formation in African educational settings. Practically, the findings are expected to provide valuable insights for policymakers, curriculum developers, teachers, and educational institutions seeking to strengthen moral education within increasingly diverse and complex school environments. By moving beyond purely normative assumptions and focusing on lived educational realities, this

research contributes to broader debates concerning religion, morality, social cohesion, and educational transformation in contemporary African societies.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine how religious education influences moral development within Ghanaian schools. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate because the study sought to explore participants' lived experiences, perceptions, interpretations, and social interactions rather than measure variables statistically. The qualitative paradigm allows researchers to investigate complex educational and socio-cultural phenomena within their natural settings while capturing the meanings individuals attach to their experiences. In the context of this study, moral development was understood as a socially constructed and context-dependent process shaped by religious instruction, institutional culture, interpersonal relationships, and broader community values.

The multiple-case study design was specifically selected because it enabled comparative exploration across different school contexts characterized by varying religious compositions and institutional environments. This design provided opportunities to identify recurring patterns, contextual differences, and shared experiences regarding the implementation of Religious and Moral Education (RME) and its perceived influence on students' ethical behaviour. Furthermore, the case study approach facilitated an in-depth investigation of classroom practices, school culture, and interfaith interactions that could not be adequately captured through purely quantitative methods. By combining interviews, observations, focus group discussions, and document analysis, the study generated rich and triangulated data capable of producing a holistic understanding of moral education within contemporary Ghanaian schools.

Research Setting and Duration

The study was conducted in selected public and faith-based junior and senior high schools located in the Bono, Ashanti, and Greater Accra Regions of Ghana. These regions were purposively selected because they represent diverse socio-cultural and religious environments where Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion coexist within educational institutions. The selected schools also varied in terms of institutional orientation, student population, and geographical setting, thereby allowing broader exploration of how religious education functions across different educational contexts.

Data collection was carried out over a six-month period from January to June 2025. This duration enabled prolonged engagement within the field, which is essential for enhancing credibility in qualitative research. During this period, the researchers conducted repeated school visits, classroom observations, interviews, and focus group discussions in order to gain deeper understanding of participants' experiences and institutional practices. The extended fieldwork period also allowed the researchers to observe religious and moral activities embedded within routine school practices, including assemblies, classroom instruction, disciplinary interactions, and extracurricular programmes.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The population of the study consisted of Religious and Moral Education teachers, school administrators, students, and selected religious leaders associated with the participating schools. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because the study required information-rich individuals who possessed direct experience and knowledge relevant to religious education and moral development. Purposive sampling is widely recommended in qualitative research when the objective is to obtain deep contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization.

A total of 48 participants were involved in the study, comprising 18 students, 15 Religious and Moral Education teachers, 6 school administrators, and 9 religious leaders from Christian, Muslim, and African Traditional Religious backgrounds. Student participants were selected from upper junior high and senior high levels because these groups were considered capable of critically reflecting on their moral learning experiences and social interactions within school environments. Teachers included in the study were required to have at least three years of experience teaching Religious and Moral Education in order to ensure familiarity with curriculum implementation and classroom challenges. School administrators were selected based on their involvement in student discipline and school policy implementation, while religious leaders were included because of their engagement with moral and religious instruction within local communities.

To ensure diversity of perspectives, the sampling process considered gender, religious affiliation, educational background, and institutional type. Participants who were unwilling to provide informed consent or who lacked direct involvement in religious education activities were excluded from the study. The combination of multiple participant categories enabled triangulation of perspectives regarding the moral influence of religious education within schools.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using four primary instruments: semi-structured interview guides, focus group discussion protocols, observation checklists, and document analysis frameworks. These instruments were developed based on the study objectives, existing literature on moral education, and theoretical perspectives related to moral development and religious pluralism. The use of multiple instruments enhanced methodological triangulation and increased the depth and credibility of the findings.

The semi-structured interview guide was designed to explore participants' perceptions regarding the role of religious education in shaping moral values, ethical reasoning, student behaviour, and interfaith relationships. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to provide detailed explanations and personal reflections. The interview protocol also included probing questions to clarify emerging themes and deepen responses. Focus group discussion protocols were specifically developed for student participants to facilitate interaction, collective reflection, and discussion of shared experiences regarding moral learning within school settings.

Observation checklists were used during classroom instruction, school assemblies, and religious activities to document teaching practices, student interactions, disciplinary approaches, and manifestations of moral behaviour within natural school environments. The observation framework focused on indicators such as respect, tolerance, participation, ethical dialogue, teacher-student interaction, and inclusivity in classroom practices. In addition, document analysis was conducted on Religious and Moral Education syllabi, lesson plans, school regulations, codes of conduct, and

disciplinary records in order to examine institutional approaches to moral education and value formation.

Validity and Trustworthiness of the Instruments

Several procedures were employed to ensure the trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability of the research instruments and findings. First, content validity was established through expert review involving three scholars specializing in religious education, qualitative methodology, and moral philosophy. These experts evaluated the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the interview questions, observation indicators, and discussion protocols in relation to the research objectives. Revisions were subsequently made to improve clarity, reduce ambiguity, and strengthen alignment with the study focus.

Second, a pilot study was conducted in one school that was not included in the final sample. The pilot process enabled the researchers to assess the practicality of the instruments, identify unclear questions, and estimate the duration of interviews and discussions. Minor modifications were made based on participant feedback obtained during the pilot phase. Third, methodological triangulation was applied by combining interviews, observations, focus groups, and document analysis to cross-check consistency across different data sources.

To further enhance credibility, member checking was conducted by sharing selected interview summaries and interpretations with participants for verification and clarification. Peer debriefing was also employed throughout the analysis process to minimize researcher bias and improve interpretive accuracy. Dependability was strengthened through detailed documentation of the research process, including data collection procedures, coding decisions, and analytical reflections. These strategies collectively enhanced the rigor and trustworthiness of the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted in several systematic stages. The first stage involved obtaining ethical approval and formal permission from educational authorities and school administrators. Following institutional approval, the researchers contacted potential participants and explained the objectives, procedures, and ethical principles of the study. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and interview schedules were arranged based on participants' availability.

The second stage involved conducting semi-structured interviews with teachers, administrators, and religious leaders. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was conducted either in English or in a local language familiar to participants. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and supplemented with field notes documenting contextual observations and non-verbal expressions. During the same phase, focus group discussions were conducted with students in groups of five to six participants. These discussions encouraged interaction and collective reflection on moral learning experiences within school settings.

The third stage consisted of classroom and school observations. The researchers observed Religious and Moral Education lessons, school assemblies, disciplinary activities, and student interactions in order to examine how moral values were enacted within everyday institutional practices. Observation sessions were recorded through descriptive field notes and reflective memos. The final stage involved collecting and reviewing institutional documents related to religious education, student discipline, and school moral policies. All collected data were carefully organized, transcribed, and stored securely for subsequent analysis.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a flexible and systematic approach for identifying recurring patterns, meanings, and relationships within qualitative data. The analysis process began with repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and institutional documents to achieve data familiarization and immersion.

After familiarization, initial coding was conducted manually and supported using NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software. Significant statements, recurring ideas, and meaningful segments of data were assigned descriptive codes related to moral values, teaching practices, religious diversity, institutional culture, ethical challenges, and student behaviour. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories and thematic clusters based on conceptual relationships and interpretive relevance.

The researchers then reviewed and refined emerging themes by comparing patterns across different participant groups and data sources. Themes were evaluated based on coherence, consistency, and alignment with the research objectives and theoretical framework. During the interpretation stage, themes were critically analyzed in relation to moral development theory, African communal ethics, and religious pluralism perspectives. Finally, conclusions were drawn by synthesizing thematic findings and identifying broader implications for religious education and moral development within Ghanaian schools.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered strictly to internationally recognized ethical principles governing educational research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review body and participating educational authorities. Participants were fully informed about the objectives, procedures, potential risks, and voluntary nature of the study before consent was obtained.

Confidentiality and anonymity were carefully maintained throughout the research process. Participants' names, schools, and identifying information were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities. Audio recordings, transcripts, and research documents were securely stored and accessed only by the research team. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or negative consequences.

Particular attention was given to ethical sensitivity during interactions involving students and discussions related to religion and morality. The researchers ensured that interviews and focus group discussions were conducted respectfully, without coercion, judgment, or discrimination toward any religious belief or cultural background. Throughout the study, principles of honesty, transparency, respect, and academic integrity were consistently maintained in order to ensure responsible and ethical research practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The thematic analysis generated five major themes related to the influence of religious education on moral development within Ghanaian schools. These themes included: (1) religious education as a framework for moral identity formation, (2) internalization of moral values and behavioural contradictions, (3) pedagogical practices and ethical engagement, (4) religious diversity

and interfaith interaction, and (5) structural and institutional constraints affecting moral education. The themes emerged from repeated coding and comparison of interview transcripts, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and institutional documents. Table 1 presents a summary of the major themes and their corresponding sources of evidence.

Table 1. Major Themes Generated from Thematic Analysis

Theme	Subthemes	Main Sources of Evidence
Religious Education as Moral Formation	Moral guidance, discipline, identity formation	Interviews, observations
Internalization of Moral Values	Honesty, respect, tolerance, behavioural inconsistency	Interviews, FGDs
Pedagogical Practices	Storytelling, dialogue, rote learning, disengagement	Classroom observations, interviews
Religious Diversity	Interfaith tolerance, inclusion, denominational imbalance	FGDs, observations
Institutional Challenges	Teacher preparedness, curriculum pressure, external influences	Interviews, documents

Religious Education as a Framework for Moral Formation

The findings revealed that Religious and Moral Education (RME) is widely perceived as an important mechanism for shaping students' moral identity, ethical awareness, and social responsibility within Ghanaian schools. Teachers consistently described religious education as a subject designed not merely to transmit doctrinal knowledge but to cultivate discipline, respect, and responsible behaviour among students. In many schools, moral instruction was embedded within broader institutional culture through assemblies, school regulations, devotional activities, and teacher-student interactions. As a result, students frequently associated religious education with behavioural expectations both inside and outside the classroom. Several participants explained that religious instruction influenced how students evaluated their actions and interpersonal relationships. A senior high school student explained:

“Religious education makes us think about how our actions affect other people. Sometimes after the lessons, I reflect on whether my behaviour toward friends or teachers is right or wrong because we are constantly reminded about respect and responsibility.” (Student Participant 08)

Similarly, teachers emphasized that RME was expected to guide students toward socially acceptable behaviour and moral discipline. One teacher stated:

“In this school, religious education is expected to shape character, not only academic performance. Parents and school authorities believe students should become morally responsible individuals through these lessons.” (Teacher Participant 05)

Classroom observations further showed that teachers frequently linked religious teachings to everyday moral issues such as dishonesty, disrespect, bullying, and peer conflict. However, despite these intentions, the findings also revealed that moral understanding did not always translate into consistent behaviour. Some participants admitted that students often demonstrated ethical behaviour primarily in supervised environments while behaving differently outside formal school settings. This suggests that moral formation within schools remains a negotiated and context-dependent process rather than a straightforward outcome of religious instruction alone.

Internalization of Moral Values and Behavioural Contradictions

The study identified honesty, respect, discipline, tolerance, responsibility, forgiveness, and compassion as the most frequently emphasized moral values within religious education classrooms. These values were consistently reinforced through classroom discussions, school assemblies, disciplinary practices, and institutional expectations. Students generally demonstrated awareness of these ethical principles and were able to explain their importance in maintaining peaceful relationships and social harmony within school communities. Honesty emerged as a particularly significant value due to increasing concerns regarding examination malpractice and academic dishonesty. Teachers repeatedly emphasized integrity as a moral obligation connected to both religious teachings and responsible citizenship. One participant explained:

“Teachers always remind us that cheating in exams is not only against school rules but also against God’s teachings. They tell us that honesty is more important than passing through dishonest means.” (Student Participant 13)

Respect was similarly reinforced through daily school interactions. Observational data showed that students were expected to greet teachers respectfully, comply with school regulations, and demonstrate politeness toward peers and elders. In several schools, respect was framed not only as a religious virtue but also as an essential aspect of Ghanaian cultural identity and communal living.

Nevertheless, the findings also revealed significant contradictions between moral instruction and students’ actual behaviour. Although participants demonstrated awareness of moral expectations, many acknowledged that incidents of dishonesty, bullying, verbal aggression, and disrespect remained common within school environments. Some students admitted that moral behaviour was sometimes performed strategically to avoid punishment rather than genuinely internalized as personal ethical conviction. One student remarked:

“Sometimes students behave well only when teachers are around because they know they can be punished. But outside the classroom, many students still insult each other or ignore what they learn in religious education.” (Student Participant 04)

Teachers similarly expressed frustration regarding the gap between moral knowledge and behavioural transformation. Several participants suggested that external influences such as social media, peer pressure, and family instability often weakened the impact of school-based moral instruction. These findings indicate that while religious education contributes to ethical awareness, moral development remains shaped by broader social realities that extend beyond formal classroom teaching.

Pedagogical Practices and Ethical Engagement

The findings demonstrated that pedagogical approaches significantly influenced students’ moral engagement and ethical reflection. Interactive teaching methods such as storytelling, debates, role-playing, group discussions, and reflective dialogue were consistently associated with stronger student participation and deeper moral reasoning. Participants explained that these approaches allowed students to connect moral lessons to real-life experiences and contemporary social issues.

Storytelling emerged as one of the most effective pedagogical strategies observed during the study. Teachers frequently used narratives involving honesty, forgiveness, peer conflict, and social responsibility to stimulate emotional reflection and ethical discussion among students. During

classroom observations, students appeared more engaged when lessons incorporated relatable examples rather than abstract doctrinal explanations. One teacher explained:

“When students hear real stories about moral problems, they begin to reflect on their own behaviour. Storytelling helps them connect religious teachings to situations they experience every day.” (Teacher Participant 11)

Focus group discussions also revealed that students preferred participatory classroom environments where they could openly express opinions, question moral dilemmas, and debate social issues affecting young people. Discussions involving social media behaviour, respect for diversity, and peer influence generated particularly active engagement among participants. Despite these positive experiences, the study found that many schools still relied heavily on rote learning and examination-oriented instructional practices. In several observed classrooms, students spent considerable time memorizing notes and religious concepts with limited opportunities for ethical reflection or critical dialogue. Some students described these lessons as repetitive and disconnected from their everyday realities. One participant commented:

“Sometimes the class becomes more about memorizing definitions and religious facts instead of discussing how the lessons relate to problems students actually face.” (Student Participant 06)

Large class sizes, limited instructional time, and curriculum pressure were frequently identified as barriers preventing teachers from consistently implementing learner-centered pedagogies. Consequently, the depth of moral engagement varied considerably across schools and classrooms.

Religious Diversity and Interfaith Interaction

Religious diversity within Ghanaian schools was found to shape both positive interfaith interaction and subtle forms of exclusion. Many participants described schools as spaces where students from Christian, Muslim, and African Traditional Religious backgrounds interacted peacefully and developed mutual respect through shared academic and social activities. Interfaith cooperation during group discussions, extracurricular programmes, and classroom tasks was frequently associated with the promotion of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Several students explained that regular interaction with peers from different religious backgrounds reduced prejudice and encouraged empathy. One participant stated:

“In school, we learn how to cooperate with people from different religions. Even when our beliefs are different, we are taught to respect one another and avoid discrimination.” (Student Participant 15)

Classroom observations similarly revealed efforts by some teachers to incorporate examples from multiple religious traditions during moral discussions. These inclusive approaches appeared to strengthen classroom participation and reduce fear of marginalization among minority students. However, the findings also revealed underlying tensions associated with denominational imbalance and unequal representation within some schools. A number of Muslim students reported that moral examples, devotional activities, and classroom references occasionally reflected predominantly Christian perspectives, particularly in schools with strong Christian institutional identities. Some

participants expressed concern that minority religious experiences were not always equally acknowledged during classroom discussions. One Muslim student explained:

“Most examples during lessons are usually based on Christianity, so students from other religions sometimes feel less included in the discussions.” (Student Participant 09)

In addition, a few participants indicated that some students avoided openly discussing religious differences due to fear of misunderstanding or social tension. These findings suggest that while religious diversity can strengthen ethical awareness and social cohesion, inclusive pedagogical practices remain essential for ensuring equitable participation and meaningful interfaith engagement within pluralistic school environments.

Structural and Institutional Constraints

The findings identified several institutional and structural challenges limiting the effectiveness of religious education in promoting moral development within Ghanaian schools. One of the most significant concerns involved insufficient teacher preparation in interfaith education, ethical facilitation, and learner-centered pedagogy. Many participants explained that some teachers possessed strong doctrinal knowledge but lacked adequate training in managing sensitive moral discussions and religious diversity within classrooms. Curriculum-related pressures also emerged as a major challenge. Teachers frequently reported that the Religious and Moral Education syllabus prioritized broad content coverage and examination performance, leaving limited space for reflective dialogue and practical ethical engagement. One teacher stated:

“We are expected to complete many topics within limited time, so sometimes moral discussions become rushed because teachers focus more on preparing students for examinations.” (Teacher Participant 02)

Observational data further indicated that overcrowded classrooms and limited instructional resources constrained opportunities for meaningful student participation and individualized engagement. In some schools, classroom conditions discouraged open dialogue and reduced the effectiveness of participatory teaching approaches. Participants additionally emphasized that external social influences often complicated moral education efforts within schools. Teachers repeatedly referred to the influence of social media, popular youth culture, family instability, and economic pressures as factors shaping students’ behaviour in ways that sometimes contradicted classroom teachings. Several educators expressed concern that students were increasingly exposed to conflicting moral messages outside school environments. Importantly, some participants questioned whether religious education alone could adequately address broader societal moral challenges. A school administrator explained:

“Schools can teach moral values, but students also return to communities where corruption, disrespect, and violence are visible in everyday life. This makes moral education more complicated than simply teaching religious lessons.” (Administrator Participant 03)

Overall, the findings suggest that although religious education contributes meaningfully to ethical awareness and social responsibility, its effectiveness remains influenced by institutional conditions, pedagogical quality, and wider socio-cultural realities operating within contemporary Ghanaian society.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that religious education continues to play a significant role in shaping moral consciousness and ethical awareness within Ghanaian schools. However, the study also reveals that moral formation is far more complex than the institutional presence of Religious and Moral Education (RME) itself. Although students generally understood values such as honesty, discipline, tolerance, and responsibility, this awareness did not always translate into consistent moral behaviour. This finding supports contemporary critiques of moral development theory which argue that ethical cognition alone is insufficient to produce behavioural transformation without continuous social reinforcement and reflective engagement (DeTienne et al., 2021; Krettenauer, 2021). From the perspective of African communal ethics, morality is socially negotiated through relationships, collective accountability, and participation within community life rather than merely through individual reasoning (Metz, 2021). The findings therefore extend dominant psychological theories of moral development by demonstrating that ethical behaviour in African educational contexts is deeply shaped by communal structures and socio-cultural realities. Similar conclusions were reported by Mensah et al. (2025) and Muhammad and Lawal (2025), who found that religious education contributes positively to ethical awareness but remains dependent on environmental reinforcement. More importantly, the present study suggests that schools may successfully produce moral understanding while simultaneously struggling to cultivate sustained ethical practice, thereby exposing a critical gap between moral instruction and moral internalization.

The persistence of dishonesty, bullying, verbal aggression, and disrespect within highly religious school environments further highlights the paradoxical relationship between religious visibility and moral behaviour. This contradiction challenges traditional assumptions that exposure to religious teachings naturally produces ethical discipline among students. Instead, the findings indicate that religious education may become symbolic, ritualistic, or performative when instructional processes prioritize doctrinal transmission over reflective ethical engagement. This interpretation aligns with Moulin-Stožek and Metcalfe (2020), who argue that moral instruction frequently emphasizes memorization of religious norms without encouraging critical moral reasoning. Similarly, Kubota (2020) explains that educational systems grounded primarily in normative authority may fail to address the complex ethical realities experienced by contemporary students. The present study expands these debates by situating moral contradiction within rapidly changing African educational contexts shaped by digital culture, peer influence, and social transformation. In practical terms, this finding carries serious implications for schools and policymakers because it suggests that moral education programs focused exclusively on content delivery may unintentionally produce students who can articulate moral values theoretically while failing to practice them consistently in everyday interactions. Consequently, the study argues that the effectiveness of religious education should not be evaluated merely through curriculum presence or religious ritual participation but through its ability to facilitate reflective ethical transformation within students' lived experiences.

Another important finding concerns the significant influence of pedagogical practices on students' moral engagement and ethical reflection. Interactive teaching approaches such as storytelling, dialogue, debates, and reflective discussions were consistently associated with stronger student participation and deeper moral reasoning. This finding strongly supports constructivist perspectives which emphasize that moral understanding develops through active interpretation,

social interaction, and experiential reflection rather than passive reception of information (Buchanan et al., 2022). Storytelling, in particular, emerged as a powerful pedagogical strategy because it enabled students to connect abstract moral principles with emotionally meaningful social realities. Similar findings were identified by Sangwa (2025), Odipo (2025), and Kholidah (2022), who reported that learner-centered pedagogies strengthen ethical sensitivity, empathy, and critical reflection among students. However, this study also reveals that many classrooms remain dominated by rote learning and examination-oriented instruction, limiting opportunities for meaningful ethical dialogue. Unlike earlier studies that primarily celebrate participatory moral education, the present findings critically demonstrate how institutional academic pressures constrain teachers' capacity to implement transformative pedagogies consistently. This issue has broader educational implications because examination-driven moral instruction risks reducing ethics into memorized concepts disconnected from students' social realities. Therefore, strengthening moral education requires not only curriculum reform but also systemic transformation of assessment practices, classroom culture, and teacher preparation programs capable of supporting reflective and dialogical learning environments.

The findings additionally demonstrate that religious diversity within Ghanaian schools simultaneously promotes interfaith understanding and reproduces subtle forms of exclusion. Many students described schools as spaces where interaction among Christian, Muslim, and African Traditional Religious communities strengthened tolerance, empathy, and peaceful coexistence. This finding supports theories of multicultural and interfaith education which argue that sustained interaction across religious boundaries can reduce prejudice and foster social cohesion (Saada, 2023; Turnip, 2025). Within pluralistic educational environments, schools therefore function not only as academic institutions but also as social laboratories where students negotiate ethical coexistence across religious differences. Nevertheless, the study also found that denominational imbalance and unequal representation occasionally marginalized minority religious perspectives, particularly within schools characterized by strong institutional religious identities. Muslim students, for example, reported that moral discussions frequently reflected predominantly Christian assumptions and examples. This finding complicates earlier literature that tends to portray interfaith educational spaces as naturally inclusive and harmonious. Instead, the findings suggest that pluralism without equitable representation may unintentionally reproduce symbolic exclusion and weaken students' sense of belonging. In practical terms, such conditions may affect classroom participation, interreligious trust, and long-term perceptions of social inclusion among minority students. Consequently, the study contributes a more critical understanding of interfaith education by emphasizing that meaningful pluralism requires intentionally inclusive pedagogy, balanced curricular representation, and institutional sensitivity toward religious diversity.

The study further reveals that institutional and structural conditions significantly shape the effectiveness of religious education within schools. Teachers repeatedly identified limited instructional time, curriculum overload, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient professional training as major barriers preventing meaningful ethical engagement. These findings support previous studies by Tawiah et al. (2025), Hussam (2025), and Osagie (2025), which emphasize that successful moral education depends not only on curriculum content but also on institutional capacity and pedagogical competence. However, the present study expands this literature by demonstrating that examination-oriented educational systems may structurally undermine the transformative goals of religious education itself. Teachers frequently reported being pressured to prioritize syllabus

completion and examination preparation over reflective moral discussion. As a result, moral learning often becomes compressed into rigid instructional routines with limited opportunities for critical dialogue and contextual ethical exploration. This condition reflects a broader tension between bureaucratic educational accountability and humanistic educational philosophy within contemporary schooling systems. Importantly, the findings imply that educational reforms focusing solely on curriculum revision are unlikely to produce substantial moral transformation without parallel investment in teacher development, classroom conditions, and pedagogical support systems. Without these structural improvements, religious education risks remaining institutionally visible yet pedagogically ineffective in addressing contemporary moral challenges among students.

Another critical finding concerns the growing influence of digital culture, social media, peer pressure, and family instability on students' moral experiences. Teachers and school administrators consistently acknowledged that students are increasingly exposed to competing moral narratives outside formal educational environments. This finding supports recent scholarship arguing that contemporary moral socialization is no longer dominated by traditional institutions such as schools, families, or religious organizations alone (Ge & Fu, 2025; Liu, 2025; Xiong, 2026). Instead, young people navigate fragmented ethical environments shaped by online communication, popular culture, economic pressure, and transnational digital influences. Within this context, moral contradiction among students should not simply be interpreted as evidence of educational failure but as a reflection of competing systems of moral authority operating simultaneously within their lives. The findings therefore challenge reductionist perspectives that blame schools exclusively for moral decline among young people. More importantly, they suggest that religious education grounded solely in traditional doctrinal approaches may become increasingly disconnected from the ethical realities students encounter in digitally mediated societies. In practical terms, this condition may weaken the relevance of moral instruction if schools fail to critically engage issues such as online behaviour, digital ethics, cyberbullying, media influence, and identity negotiation among youth. Consequently, the study argues that contemporary religious education must evolve beyond conventional moral preaching toward critical ethical engagement with modern social realities.

The findings also contribute theoretically by challenging the dominance of universalist Western models of moral development within educational research. Classical theories frequently conceptualize morality as a progression of individual rational reasoning and autonomous ethical judgment. However, the Ghanaian context examined in this study demonstrates that moral behaviour is deeply embedded within communal identity, social harmony, relational accountability, and collective responsibility. This finding strongly supports African relational ethics as articulated by Metz (2021), while simultaneously extending contemporary discussions on culturally responsive moral education. At the same time, the findings reveal that communal morality itself is increasingly being transformed by globalization, urbanization, and technological change. This creates a hybrid moral environment in which traditional communal ethics coexist with rapidly shifting global cultural influences. Unlike earlier studies that treat African morality as culturally static, the present study demonstrates that moral formation within contemporary African schools is dynamic, negotiated, and continuously reshaped by social transformation. This conceptual contribution is important because it positions African educational realities within broader global debates concerning pluralism, postcolonial identity, and ethical citizenship. Consequently, the study provides a more contextualized

framework for understanding how morality is constructed, contested, and practiced within multicultural and digitally interconnected societies.

Collectively, the findings position this study within wider international discussions concerning the future of religious education in pluralistic societies. While earlier scholarship often portrays religious education either as a moral solution or as a source of ideological tension, the present study demonstrates that its influence is considerably more complex, context-dependent, and socially negotiated. Religious education remains capable of strengthening ethical awareness, empathy, and social responsibility, yet its transformative potential depends heavily on pedagogical quality, institutional inclusivity, and socio-cultural relevance. The study therefore fills an important gap in existing literature by moving beyond normative assumptions and critically examining how moral values are actually interpreted and practiced within everyday educational environments in Africa. More significantly, the research offers a conceptual shift by framing moral formation as a dynamic interaction between religious instruction, institutional structures, social pluralism, and contemporary youth realities. This perspective expands existing debates on moral education beyond simplistic assumptions of religious determinism and highlights the necessity of context-sensitive ethical pedagogy in multicultural societies. Ultimately, the study suggests that unless religious education evolves toward more reflective, inclusive, and critically engaged approaches, schools may continue producing students who understand moral values intellectually but struggle to embody them consistently within complex contemporary social environments.

CONCLUSION

Religious education continues to occupy a powerful and influential position within Ghanaian schools, not merely as a curricular subject but as a moral institution expected to shape students' ethical consciousness, social responsibility, and interfaith coexistence. The findings of this study demonstrate that Religious and Moral Education contributes meaningfully to the promotion of values such as honesty, respect, tolerance, discipline, and responsibility among students. Interactive pedagogical approaches, reflective dialogue, and inclusive classroom environments were found to strengthen ethical awareness and encourage moral reflection within pluralistic educational settings. At the same time, the study reveals that moral development is far more complex than the simple transmission of religious knowledge. Students often demonstrate awareness of moral principles while simultaneously engaging in behaviours that contradict those very teachings, suggesting that moral understanding does not automatically produce moral transformation.

More importantly, this study challenges the long-standing assumption that the presence of religious education alone guarantees ethical behaviour among students. In many cases, religious instruction risks becoming ritualistic, examination-driven, and performative rather than genuinely transformative. The persistence of dishonesty, intolerance, bullying, and social misconduct within highly religious school environments raises uncomfortable but necessary questions regarding the actual effectiveness of contemporary moral education practices. The study therefore argues that moral formation cannot rely solely on doctrinal instruction or institutional religiosity. Instead, meaningful moral development requires critical reflection, inclusive pedagogy, emotionally engaging learning experiences, and broader social environments capable of reinforcing ethical behaviour beyond classroom walls. Unless religious education evolves from memorization-based instruction toward deeper ethical engagement with contemporary social realities, schools may continue

producing students who can explain moral values theoretically but struggle to practice them consistently in everyday life.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

KA conceptualized the study, developed the research framework, supervised the data collection process, and led the manuscript writing and overall coordination of the research project. **TKC** contributed to the research design, data interpretation, and critical revision of the manuscript, particularly in relation to curriculum and educational perspectives. **TD** participated in data collection, thematic analysis, and the interpretation of findings related to moral and religious education. **MFXX** contributed to methodological refinement, data organization, and the analysis of socio-cultural dimensions influencing moral development within schools. **BC** assisted in literature review development, participant coordination, transcription, and manuscript editing.

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