RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sunday schools and identity formation: Perceptions and experiences of religious education leaders in Karachi, Pakistan

[a, b, *] Munir Lalani

[a]Faculty, Notre Dame Institute of Education, Karachi, Central Jacob Lines Karachi, Karachi City, Sindh 74400 Pakistan
[b]PhD Scholar, Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, 1-5/b-VII, 1-5/B Street 7, Federal B Area Karimabad Block 7 Gulberg Town, Karachi, Karachi City, Sindh 75950 Pakistan

[*]Corresponding author: munir.lalani@ndie.edu.pk

Abstract

This research project attempts to explore the perceptions and experiences of Christian religious education leaders regarding the role of Sunday Schools in forming the socio-religious identity of Christian students in Karachi. Employing case study design within the qualitative paradigm of educational research, this study seeks to explore how leaders visualize their role and contribution in shaping the socio-religious identities of the children through Sunday Schools. The data was collected from the three participants through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of the data facilitated an understanding of the dynamics of leadership function, including challenges, limitations, and opportunities. The findings highlight the need for modern teaching approaches and parental involvement in religious education. The study's analysis and results provide valuable insights into the complexities of religious education leadership and the importance of Sunday Schools in shaping students' socio-religious identities. This research contributes to the broader discussion on religious education and its impact on students' identity formation, highlighting the need for continued exploration and development. Additionally, this research can serve as a foundation for further studies on religious education leadership and its role in shaping students' identities.

Keywords: *Religious Education, Sunday School, Socio-Religious Identity, Parental Support*

1. Background and Context

According to the latest official census in 2017, Christians make up approximately 1.27% of Pakistan's population, totaling around 2.6 million individuals. Notably, the number of Roman Catholics and Protestants in Pakistan is roughly equal, with both denominations having a similar presence (Ahmed et al., 2021). Among Protestants, the Church of Pakistan is the largest group, combining the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Lutheran Churches. Despite being a religious minority in Pakistan, the Christian community has played an active role in the education, health, and other developmental sectors of Pakistan. At the time of independence in 1947, missionary schools were the source of formal education for about 57 % of students in Pakistan. The missionary-supported schools continue to function in all the major cities of Pakistan (Chawla, 2018; Rasiah, 2020; Rizvi, 2010). However, apart from these institutions, they have a religious education system comprising Sunday Schools. While the missionary schools, like other mainstream private schools follow the national curriculum and are open to all communities, the Sunday Schools are specific non-formal schools to provide structured and comprehensive religious education to Christian children. No official document states the total number of Sunday Schools in Karachi. Based on oral communication with two of the representatives of the Sunday School Ministry (archdiocese of Karachi), more than 700 Sunday Schools of different denominations impart religious education to Christian children in Karachi.

Though the term "Sunday School" is not in the Bible, it is vital to Christian children's ethical, moral, social, and spiritual development. Initially, these church schools were set up in 18th century England primarily to fulfill the educational needs of the children working in factories. The Sunday School movement, mainly led by Protestant churches, soon spread in Europe, America, and other parts of the world. Throughout history, Sunday Schools have evolved with diverse approaches in different contexts across various denominations and churches. Traditionally, situated in the basement of a church, these schools are considered an essential responsibility of the churches to help children grow in faith (Palmer, 1880; Towns, 1979).

The structure of Sunday schools across various churches in Karachi is broadly similar, with minor variations. Typically, classes are divided into age-specific groups, such as juniors and seniors, to tailor lessons and activities to each group's needs. Each class has a dedicated teacher

responsible for planning and teaching the lessons, focusing primarily on the Bible, its stories, values, and teachings, including faith, love, compassion, and Jesus' teachings. The curriculum is designed to progress sequentially, allowing students to build upon their knowledge and deepen their understanding over time. Supplementary resources like storybooks, workbooks, and visual aids enhance the learning experience. Sunday school typically convenes weekly on Sunday mornings, following a set schedule that includes an opening prayer, lesson, activities, and closing. Special events like holiday programs, Bible quizzes, and community projects provide additional learning opportunities and fun. Sunday school teachers, usually volunteers from the church, are committed to teaching and supporting students. Churches often offer training and resources to help teachers understand the curriculum and enhance their teaching skills. Informal assessments, such as observing student participation and engagement, help teachers monitor progress. Follow-up activities, discussions, and take-home materials reinforce the lessons learned during Sunday school.

Similar to the leadership of mainstream secular schooling, leadership is primarily an influential factor in understanding the overall functioning of the religious education system. Besides creating a viable institutional climate, culture, and learning environment, the achievement of the intended educational goals is influenced by leadership practices. The rationale for this research lies in the importance of understanding the perceptions and experiences of religious and educational leaders in the local context. These leaders possess unique styles, beliefs, and motives that stem from their perceptions, shaping their positionality, institutional vision, commitment, and decision-making processes. The interconnection between perceptions and practices is crucial, as it influences the leader's approach to education and the institution's overall direction. This study addresses the dearth of literature on religious education leadership in the Pakistani context, particularly among the Christian minority. Exploring the perceptions and experiences of religious education leaders can better inform and enhance leadership development programs. Moreover, a study on perceptions of religious educational leadership can yield valuable insights into organizational behavior, revealing how leaders' perceptions influence their management style and approaches. However, it is essential to acknowledge that perceptions are formed through a selective process, where sensory information is screened, selected, and interpreted. Therefore, even the perceptions of leaders working in the

same organization can vary based on their perceptual selectivity (Chong & Wolf, 2010; Van den Berg, 2004). By investigating the perceptions and experiences of religious education leaders, this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge, providing a deeper understanding of the dynamics involved in Sunday School leadership in Karachi, Pakistan.

Accordingly, this research paper is organized into five key sections. First, a brief literature review provides an overview of the existing research on religious education leadership, highlighting the gaps and limitations that this study aims to address. Next, the methodology section outlines the research design, sampling strategy, data collection method, and analysis strategies used to investigate the perceptions and experiences of religious education leaders. The findings and discussion section presents the study's results, highlighting the key themes and insights from the data and their implications. The conclusion and recommendations section summarizes the main findings and provides recommendations for future research and practice. Finally, the references section lists all sources cited in the report, providing a comprehensive bibliography for further reading.

2.   Literature Review

Pakistan- a country with the world's largest mud volcanoes, the second largest salt mines, the largest deep-sea port, the world's only fertile desert, and four out of the fourteen highest mountain peaks globally, is a testament to its diverse natural wonders (Altaf, 2022; Deville, 2009; Rasul & Karki-Nepal, 2024). This rich diversity does not exist only in terms of its geographical landscape but also its culture and traditions. Located at the crossroads of South Asia and Central Asia, it has become a melting pot of influences from the traditions of settlers, including emperors, poets, artists, mystics, and many others (Sardar & Saeed, 2020). Although the majority of the population comprises Muslims, Pakistan is a homeland of diverse religious groups, including Christianity, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, and also minor religious groups such as Kalash religion (Halai & Durrani, 2017; Niyozov & Lalani, 2019). Although Christians comprise a small minority of 1.27% (approximately 2.6 million) of Pakistan's population, Christianity has a rich history and deep roots. Interestingly, several traditions suggest that Christianity has been present in Taxila since the time of St. Thomas, dating back to around 52 A.D. (Bhatti, 2023; Shaji, 2010).

Christianity has been present in the land that is now Pakistan for centuries. It is often perceived as a foreign religion due to its Western associations. These influences are evident in the architectural style of churches and the orientation of liturgy, including music (Gabriel, 2007). However, Christian institutions have made concerted efforts to shed these influences and redefine their identity following Pakistani culture and socio-economic patterns. One such example is empowering a section of the Christian community in Faisalabad through higher education, which has enabled them to integrate with mainstream groups and maintain social and economic stability (United Kingdom: Home Office, 2018).

Religious education plays a vital role in preserving the identity of minority groups, particularly in countries where they are not represented in the mainstream education system (Cohen-Zada, 2006). In Pakistan, Sunday Schools provide Christian children with religious education, which is not catered to in the mainstream education system. These schools offer a comprehensive approach to religious education tailored to the children's level, allowing them to learn and reflect on Christian values. The Bible encourages God's people to internalize divine commandments, making them a part of their hearts and daily lives. This involves not only memorizing and listening to scriptures but also putting them into practice in everyday actions, as emphasized in Deuteronomy 6:7 and James 1:22. By doing so, individuals can deepen their understanding and live out their faith in a practical way, passing it on to future generations Sunday Schools are one such institute that provides opportunity, particularly to the children to learn the Bible systematically. This learning medium provides a comparatively different experience from the sermon and children's club programs. The sermons are generally not interactive and are usually selective in their approach. Even church-led camps and clubs have less instructional approach. In contrast, Sunday Schools provide systematic and comprehensive coverage of religious education tailored to the children's level (Whitehead, 2010). The current socio-political dynamics in Pakistan, where Islamic narratives are shaping national identity, are leading to the political exclusion and marginalization of minority groups, including Christians. This demands a proactive response from minority religious institutions to redefine their identity and negotiate their place within the nation. Sunday school serves as a vital platform for Christian children to proudly affirm their religious and national identity, even in a Muslim-majority setting. By recognizing and addressing the unique

needs and challenges of minority Christian communities, Sunday school can play a crucial role in nurturing a strong sense of religious and national identity among Christian children, empowering them to flourish in a diverse societal landscape (Ispahani, 2013; Lalani et al., 2020; Mehfooz, 2021)

Sunday Schools in Pakistan and many other countries with similar contexts face numerous challenges, including limited resources and, at times, untrained teachers. For example, a study by Daud et al. (2021) highlighted several challenges Sunday Schools face in Indonesian churches, including inadequate infrastructure and a lack of trained teachers, often appointed solely based on their willingness to volunteer. Additionally, the study noted the absence of a structured curriculum, insufficient funding, limited access to learning resources (mainly digital tools), and a lack of professional development opportunities for volunteer teachers. Similarly, churches in Karachi face comparable challenges. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, creative teaching methods can effectively engage children and foster a love for learning (Hareefa, 2020; Lalani et al., 2020). Effective leadership is crucial to addressing challenges and ensuring the success of Sunday Schools. The two major leadership models inspired by the Biblical teachings are Shepherd and Servant leadership. Traditionally, the image of 'Shepherd leadership' has long been associated with the teachers and heads of the Sunday Schools. In the New Testament, the imagery of the 'Shepherd' is used for the Church leaders commissioned to 'feed and guard the sheep' in contrast to wolves who come to destroy the sheep. This imagery depicts the role of leaders as caregivers, guardians, and authoritative counsels (McCormick & Davenport, 2004). The highest value of this model is believed to have been exemplified by Jesus Christ in the New Testament, where he claims to be a good shepherd as he knows his sheep (i.e., his followers) and gives his life for them (John 10:14-16). This explains the attributes of the shepherd leaders as committed and dedicated to their mission of protecting, guiding, loving, caring, and being compassionate with their followers (Anselmus Dami, 2024). On the other hand, Servant leadership primarily focuses on leaders' role to serve rather than exercising their authority to achieve the intended goals. Servant leaders are expected to influence their followers by empowering them to help them achieve their goals (Resane, 2020). The shepherd leadership style resembles and compliments the servant leadership style but differs as the shepherd leaders are generally expected to lead from the front and in noticeable ways (McCormick &

Davenport, 2004). Shepherd leadership embodies traits, behaviors, and the leaders' motives. The term 'shepherd' as a metaphor in the context of leadership can also be understood from the examples of the Biblical Prophets (e.g., Moses and David) who were shepherds but, even in their leadership roles, demonstrated humility by guiding their people with compassion and understanding their needs. Similarly, this metaphor calls for leaders to foster the well-being of their followers (Averin, 2020; Wessels, 2014).

In Pakistan, there is a dearth of Sunday school research study practices (Lalani et al., 2020). To address the gap, this study explores the perceptions and experiences of religious education leaders of Sunday Schools in Karachi.

3. Methodology

The following research question guides this research:

What are the perceptions and perceived experiences of the religious education leaders from the Protestant Church regarding the role of Sunday Schools in forming the socio-religious identity of the Christian students in the context of Karachi?

This study was conducted in Karachi, Pakistan's Sindh province's largest city and economic hub. Karachi is home to the country's largest Christian minority population, making up 2.9% of the city's total population. Karachi is also home to some of Pakistan's most iconic and historic churches, including St. Patrick's Cathedral, St. Andrew's Church, and Holy Trinity Cathedral, among others (Raina, 2014).

This research employs an exploratory case study design within the qualitative paradigm of educational research. Employing a qualitative research method allowed the researcher to explore the participants' viewpoints without predefining rigid and narrow categories. Critical analysis of the data collected from the participants (religious, educational leaders) served the purpose of understanding the dynamics of voluntary leadership function at Sunday Schools and how it views the role of its institutes (i.e., Sunday Schools) in shaping students' socio-religious identities (Labra et al., 2019).

The data was collected from the semi-structured interviews with the three participants using a purposive sampling strategy. The criteria for selecting participants were in terms of (1) having an academic and religious background with leadership experience of serving in Sunday Schools for at least one year, (2) their availability to participate in the

study during the required timeframe, (3) having voluntary willingness to share their experiences for the research study.

Table 1 provides brief profile information of the participants. As a part of ethical considerations, pseudonyms are used instead of participants' real names. Furthermore, to maintain confidentiality, the name of their Church and Sunday School is also not mentioned.

Table 1

Brief profile of the participants

Name of the Participant (leader)	Brief Profile
Solomon	Qualification: Master in General History, Masters in Divinity Profession: Faculty in a Religious College Volunteering role in Church: Pastoral Assistant, Secretary of Parish Committee
Flora	Qualification: Bachelors in Arts, Masters in Divinity (in progress) Profession: Private School teacher Volunteering role in Church: Senior teacher /educator, In-Charge
Nathan	Qualification: B.Ed. (Hons) from U.K Profession: Secondary School Head Volunteering role in Church: Deacon, Volunteers at YAG (Young Adults Group, Karachi).

For data analysis, themes were generated manually without the use of software. Firstly, the interviews with the research participants were transcribed verbatim, i.e., every word and phrase spoken was accurately recorded and written down. Next, transcripts were read and re-read to identify patterns and codes assigned manually. The codes were based on the research questions and objectives and were refined through an iterative data analysis process.

The interview questions used in the study were researcher-made and were developed specifically for this research project. The questions were designed to explore the research participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions regarding the role of Sunday Schools in shaping the socio-religious identity of Christian students in Karachi. Although the questions were not validated formally, they were pilot-tested to ensure clarity and relevance. The interview questions were part of a more extensive assignment to explore the research question. The questions were designed

to be open-ended and exploratory, allowing participants to share their thoughts and experiences in detail. The manual coding process also allowed for a high degree of flexibility and adaptability, enabling the refinement of codes and themes during data analysis. The lack of formal validation of the interview question was a limitation of this study. Nevertheless, the manual approach to theme generation and coding allowed for a rich and in-depth exploration of the research topic and provided valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of the research participants.

This mini-research followed critical ethical considerations. There was no compulsion, benefit, or compensation for the participants to contribute to this study. There was no anticipated risk for the participants at any research stage. No such questions were asked in the interview that could evoke anxiety, fear, or embarrassment. The preference of using pseudonyms names instead of numbers in this academic paper is to make the discussion reader-friendly and reflective (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Crow & Wiles, 2008).

4.   Findings and Discussions

The primary research objective was to investigate the perceptions of religious education leaders in the Protestant Church regarding the impact of Sunday Schools on the socio-religious identity formation of Christian students in Karachi, which informs the thematic analysis and interpretation of the data.

The thematic analysis of the data has resulted in the following significant findings:

4.1 *Formation of Socio-Religious Identity*

Socio-religious identities of the communities are rooted in history and can evolve. These identities are fluid and show adaptability as communities continually situate and, at times, redefine their identities in response to varying sociocultural and political circumstances (Berger & Ezzy, 2009). The study of Grit (2019) on the three Christian organizations in Pakistan informs that Pakistani Christian identity is influenced by the changing legislation and the social-political experiences of the Christians co-existing with the Muslim majority in different parts of the country.

Similarly, Solomon, in his interview, asserted, "*Since independence, Christians have co-existed and lived with the Muslim majority in Pakistan. As time*

passes, the new generations are becoming more confident in articulating their faith and socio-religious identity" (Interview, March 30, 2023).

Without specifying any contributing factors, Solomon views this change as an outcome of the evolution of the Christian community in Pakistan in the historical course of time. On the other hand, Flora mentions explicitly the role of Sunday school and parents in shaping socio-religious identities for the children.

In the interview, she remarked, "*Developing socio-religious identity is not a one-time event. It is a process influenced by your surroundings. Sunday School teachers and parents help the children form their religious identity*" (Interview, March 30, 2023).

With increasing access to religious education, Solomon argues that children, in general, are aware of their fundamental beliefs and Christian identity. What creates confusion is the sub-divisions of identities within it. According to Solomon, this is mainly observed in a family of mixed faith (with mother Catholic and father Protestant and vice versa).

Giving a few examples, he stated, "*For instance, in such cases, children have confusion about whether to say Hail Mary or not. One group advocates infant baptism, and the other group is against this idea. Protestants cannot receive Communion (Eucharist or Lord's Supper) at Catholic Churches*" (Interview, March 30, 2023).

In such cases, Solomon added, "*Children tend to follow the traditions and rituals of the dominant family member.*" The dominant family member could be a mother, father (or any other family member). Solomon also discussed the ethnic divisions and identities of Christians in Pakistan (e.g., Punjabi et al.).

Though principally all are believed to be "*united as one body,*" Solomon argues, "The *Church is not free from the social and cultural norms prevalent in society*" and therefore, "*occasional cases of discriminatory attitudes could be observed among these ethnic groups towards each other*" (Interview, March 30, 2023).

Solomon's observations and views resonate with the larger social fabric of Pakistani society, where sectarian and religious denominations,

ethnic and socio-economic divides, and conflicts are commonly observed (Niyozov & Lalani, 2019).

4.2 Value of Sunday Schools in Formation of Socio-Religious Identity

In many contexts, Sunday Schools are viewed as a catalyst for socializing children religiously and thereby shaping their socio-religious identity development. In some countries, such as Kenya, Sunday Schools are the primary and widely accepted religious education centers for Christian children (Yates, 2016). Consequently, Sunday Schools are called an educational arm of the churches responsible for orienting children to religious education and contributing towards their faith formation (Ewart, 2003; McCartney, 2019; Towns, 1979)

Based on the data collected for this study, leaders (research participants) generally believe in the value of Sunday School experiences in shaping the socio-religious identity of Christian children. However, differences could be observed in varying levels of importance, as perceived by the participants. For instance, Flora remarked:

In Sunday School, we ensure that every student gets a religious education of their age level…The students in Sunday School are better than those who have not attended the Sunday School. I have observed that Sunday School students participate (in Church services and activities) much more than those who have not attended Sunday Schools. That is the importance of Sunday School, as it allows them to serve God. (Interview, March 30, 2023).

This interview quote clearly shows the necessity and importance of Sunday School experiences for all children. On the other hand, Solomon thinks more than Sunday School; it is the primary responsibility of parents and family to teach religious education and shape the socio-religious identity of children.

He stated, "*Children learn best from their parents. The Church only reinforces what the child is already learning from the family. It is the family where they get their religious identity." Nevertheless, Solomon does not dismiss the importance of Sunday School experiences. However, he sees its value more for "children who come from broken families or in cases where parents themselves have little religious knowledge.*" In such cases, Solomon observed, "*these children are more connected with the Sunday School teachers*" (Interview, March 30, 2023).

Solomon is skeptical about the timing of some Sunday Schools where classes are scheduled during the Church Service (Holy Mass).

Solomon argues that in such cases, the value of such Sunday Schools is reduced to a mere "daycare center for taking care of children when parents are busy in worship" (Interview, March 30, 2023). On the other hand, Flora and Nathan believe that the prayers and teaching are tailored to the children's age and abilities in Sunday Schools. This way, they do not take religious practices as empty rituals but appreciate their value. Comparing a difference between learning experience from the sermon delivered by a pastor in the church and teaching at Sunday School, Nathan asserted:

There are different ways of approaching children to learn religion. During sermons (in congregations), getting feedback or making the learning interactive is generally impossible due to time constraints. However, in religion classes at Sunday Schools, there is interactive teaching and learning (Interview, April 6, 2023).

4.3 Parental Support and Involvement

Parents play an essential and active role in their children's identity formation (Muttaqin et al., 2022). Parents' involvement in religious traditions, particularly in providing religious education, encouraging them to attend religious classes, participating in religious services and festivals, and promoting religious identity development. Based on empirical evidence, Marler and Hadaway (2014) claim that communal prayers or worship, age-graded religious classes at Sunday Schools, and parental involvement collectively contribute to forming the socio-religious identity of the children.

In this study, all the research participants also emphasized the importance of parental involvement in their child's religious education. A few examples from the interview extracts are quoted:

"There are many opportunities for children to learn. They learn by practicing faith daily. Teachers and parents cannot work in isolation for the child's development. They have to work together" (Flora, Interview, March 30, 2023).

"Parents play an important part by bringing their children to the Church and Sunday School. If the parents identify themselves as practicing Christians, they raise and raise their children similarly" (Nathan, Interview, April 06, 2023).

These perceptions are influenced by the findings of different empirical studies that support the involvement of parents in their

children's education, yielding the maximization of their learning (Albanese et al., 2019; Cano, 2019).

4.4 Opportunities and Challenges at Sunday Schools

The availability of and accessibility to quality teaching resources and activities is crucial to impactful learning outcomes. One of the studies in Kenya found that the Sunday Schools had inadequate resources and facilities. Due to limited resources and activities, the Sunday schools struggled to capture the interests of the adolescents and youth who would not find the classes offered there attractive or exciting (Yates, 2016). In contrast, a study in the Indonesian context revealed that 95 % of children expressed interest in attending classes at Sunday Schools because of the exciting activities and pedagogies used by the teachers (Harefa, 2020).

All three leaders who were research participants in this study affirmed that there are different opportunities for the students and teachers at Sunday Schools to learn and grow in their faith. Nathan gave an example from his current teaching session, where while discussing the Prophet Isaiah from the scripture, there was also a discussion about the context at that time and the socio-political situation of the world at that time. Both Nathan and Solomon shared examples of activities, including youth camps and picnics. Interestingly, even the activities and games for the picnic connect and reinforce the faith-based ideas taught at the Sunday School. This is similar to the findings by Lalani et al. (2020) about the practices of the two Sunday Schools in Karachi, where religious education has been reconceptualized beyond the passive lecture methods by providing opportunities for children to participate in hands-on practical activities.

Similarly, discussing the opportunities for teachers, Flora shared, *"Teachers are empowered to design curriculum as per the needs of the children. Many times, teenagers (students) ask critical questions, which challenges the teachers to update their knowledge to address these questions appropriately"* (Interview, March 30, 2023).

Challenges in society and the wider world often affect the teaching and learning at Sunday Schools. During the pandemic of Covid-19, amidst a period of uncertainty in many contexts, educational institutes responded to the challenge by transforming on-campus classes into

online classes through video conferencing and virtual apps (Ellis et al., 2020; Thaheem et al., 2021).

Sharing her experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, Flora discussed how the teachers at her Sunday School responded to these challenges by taking classes on Zoom, WhatsApp, and other social media.

Recalling her experience, she reflected:

Every situation has both positive and negative sides. On the positive side, Covid-19 helps us to learn that we do not have to worship at Church only necessarily. The Church is not just a building; the believers are the Church. They learned how they can worship in the family or when they are alone. God sees your heart. It is about how sincerely you open your hearts to Him (Interview, March 30, 2023).

Flora shared that the teachers also learned to make videos with religious stories for the children during the pandemic. There were quizzes and activities through videos and other social media apps. However, Flora acknowledged the role of parents in it, who would "*encourage and take follow-up of learning from their children*" (Interview, March 30, 2023).

Having experience working in a Sunday School in the UK and Pakistan, Nathan compared, "Here children are more interested in attending Sunday School classes and Church worship." Nathan shared his experience that in the UK, in general, religious identity is not so central to the lives of people as in the case of Pakistan.

Over there, many times, adolescent students attending the Sunday Schools would "*feel reluctant to tell their friends that they attend religion class every Sunday. They think their friends might consider them as old-fashioned and traditional. This is not the case here in Karachi*" (Interview, April 06, 2023).

Apart from the achievements and success stories, Solomon raised critical questions about the limitations of Sunday schools in order to address all the contemporary challenges. He argued, "*Church is often regarded as the body of Christ, a spiritual reality, but Church is also an institute, and therefore it has an administrative reality. We must accept our limitations without hiding from the social realities*" (Interview, March 30, 2023).

While citing examples of worldwide violations of children's rights, he stated that positive identity development cannot take place if

the fundamental rights of the children are denied. He reinforced the importance of parental awareness of child development and issues such as child abuse, child neglect, and other forms of child maltreatment.

He emphasized, "*It is not necessary every time for the Church to lead all the changes (awareness campaigns)*" (Interview, March 30, 2023).

4.5 Existing Needs and Way Forward

The leader participants of this study had a consensus that the students' conceptual learning is of fundamental importance.

Activities and other learning experiences are means to achieve it. Reflecting on teaching experience, Flora shared her concern, "*Many times we narrate children different stories. We engage them in singing hymns and action poems, but at times some of the children do not grasp the message conveyed in it*" (Interview, March 30, 2023). For Flora, character building is an integral part of learning, and the children need to read the verses and reflect on living by them in their daily lives. Sharing a similar concern and giving an example of it, Nathan stated:

Patience is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. After learning this, if a child pushes another child in a line, there is no implementation of this learning. We also need to model these characteristics as the children learn by the examples set by the adults in their behaviors (Interview, March 30, 2023).

Flora and Nathan communicated the need to make learning relevant and applicable for children.

Flora stated, "*Biblical times were different from the world today. There are powerful messages in the scripture. The important question is how do we apply it in our lives today*" (Interview, March 30, 2023).

Flora shared that she has conducted professional development training for the teachers and is currently working with her team to design a curriculum that aligns with the current needs of the students.

All the participant leaders believe in integrating 21st-century learning skills and modern pedagogies. Solomon remarked, "*The main challenge is how we can empower children to develop their identity by learning 21st-century skills*

instead of indoctrination". Solomon did not dismiss the importance of the co-curricular activities, "*It is all right to have movie programs or pizza parties. I am not saying to move away from it. But the purpose of all we do is to empower the students rather than control them*". Discussing the need for changing approaches to teaching and learning, he elaborated.

As a minority, it is easy for them (students) to react (in response to the questions/critiques), which is fine, but it makes you rigid in your attitude. What we need to do is to develop confidence in them about their identity and beliefs. There is no need to prove it to others, that is defensive approach and indicates insecurity. What else is missing? Its knowledge of modern theories and pedagogies. We have kept learning about theories given by Piaget and Vygotsky. That is too old for now. What are the current theories and research on child development? Do we know that? We need to know that (Interview, March 30, 2023).

Similarly, Flora and Nathan emphasized integrative creative ideas and using digital technologies in teaching to maximize students' learning experiences. The literature also supports that creative teaching methods are essential for captivating students' interest and long-lasting learning (Hantla, 2014; Simamora, 2023; Zendrato et al., 2020).

5.   Conclusion and Recommendations

From the analysis of the perceived experiences of the three participants of this study, glimpses of the 'shepherd leadership' as in Psalm 23 could be observed. Some of these leadership roles include making efforts to meet the learning needs of the students, attempting to remove irritants or undesirable factors, and sharing a positive and realistic vision for their institutes (McCormick & Davenport, 2004). The leaders are aware of the different challenges and opportunities at Sunday Schools and strongly believe in parental support and involvement in shaping positive socio-religious identities of the children.

This is a small-scale research project informing the practices and perceived experiences of the leaders involved in the Sunday Schools of the Protestant Churches in Karachi. This is an under-researched area; no published research on Sunday School leadership perceptions in Karachi is available. More research studies with a larger sample size and mixed methods are recommended to gain insights into the Sunday Schools' leadership model, perception, and practices. Furthermore, comparative studies of the leadership model and perceptions of other non-formal religious education centers of various communities in

Karachi can further contribute to understanding religious education leadership perceptions and practices in the local context.

The discussion and findings of this study inform critical reflections of the leadership on essential areas, including responding to the challenges during COVID-19, integrating modern pedagogies in teaching religion, parental involvement in shaping socio-religious identities, and so on. All these areas are under-researched in the local context. Separate studies in these areas, capturing the experiences and insights from all the key stakeholders, are recommended to address the gap in the existing body of knowledge.

References

Ahmed, T., Mustafa, G., & Arslan, M, (2021). Challenges for human rights: a case study of religious minorities in Pakistan. *UOS Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, *7*(2), 100-109.

Albanese, A. M., Russo, G. R., & Geller, P. A. (2019). The role of parental self-efficacy in parent and child well-being: A systematic review of associated outcomes. *Child: care, health and development*, *45*(3), 333-363.

Allen, R. E. S., & Wiles, J. L. (2016). A rose by any other name: Participants choosing research pseudonyms. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *13*(2), 149–165.

Altaf, M. (2022). *Ecology of Mountain Ran. Ecology*, 6, 141-149.

Anselmus Dami, Z. (2024). Informal teacher leadership: Lessons from shepherd leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 27*(3), 509-538.

Averin, A. (2020). Shepherding the flock: Shepherd leadership in multi-cultural environment. *Organizational Metaphors: Faith as Key to Functional Organizations*, 79-89.

Berger, H. A., & Ezzy, D. (2009). Mass media and religious identity: A case study of young witches. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *48*(3), 501-514.

Bhatti, W. (2023). Historical Sketch of Saint Thomas in Taxila. *The Journal of Cultural Perspectives*, 2 (1) 63-78.

Cano, T., Perales, F., & Baxter, J. (2019). A matter of time: Father involvement and child cognitive outcomes. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *81*(1), 164-184.

Chawla, M. I. (2018). Focusing on Marginalized Groups in Pakistan: A Case Study of Christian Minority in Lahore. *Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities (1994-7046)*, *26*(2).

Chong, E., & Wolf, H. (2010). Factors influencing followers' perception of organisational leaders. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*.

Cohen-Zada, D. (2006). Preserving religious identity through education: Economic analysis and evidence from the US. *Journal of Urban Economics*, *60*(3), 372-398.

Crow, G., & Wiles, R. (2008). *Managing anonymity and confidentiality in social research: the case of visual data in Community research*. ESRC.

Daud, M., Weol, W., & Tulung, J. (2021). The Sunday School Curriculum of Gereja Masehi Injili Minahasa (GMIM). The International Journal of Social Sciences World (TIJOSSW), 3(2), 205-218.

Deville, E. (2009). Mud volcano systems. *Volcanoes: Formation, eruptions and modelling*, 95-125.

Ellis, V., Steadman, S., & Mao, Q. (2020). 'Come to a screeching halt': Can change in teacher education during the COVID-19 pandemic be seen as innovation?. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, *43*(4), 559-572.

Ewart, J. H. (2003). The Intentional Sunday School: A Pathway to Purpose. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, *14*(1), 11-34.

Gabriel, T. (2021). *Christian citizens in an Islamic state: The Pakistan experience*. Routledge.

Grit, K. (2019). *"Christians by Faith, Pakistani by Citizenship" Negotiating Christian Identity in Pakistan* (Doctoral dissertation, University Utrecht).

Halai, A., & Durrani, N. (2017). Teachers as agents of peace? Exploring teacher agency in social cohesion in Pakistan. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 1-18.

Hantla, B. F. (2014). *The effects of flipping the classroom on specific aspects of critical thinking in a Christian college: A quasi-experimental, mixed-methods study*. Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Harefa, S. (2020, March). Creative Learning Methods Improving Children's Interest in Attending Sunday School in Tarutung, Indonesia. In *1st International Conference on Education, Society, Economy, Humanity and Environment (ICESHE 2019)* (pp. 109-113). Atlantis Press.

Ispahani, F. (2013). Cleansing Pakistan of minorities. *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, *15*, 57-66.

Labra, O., Castro, C., Wright, R., & Chamblas, I. (2020). Thematic analysis in social work: A case study. *Global social work-cutting edge issues and critical reflections, 10*(6), 1-20.

Lalani, M., Niyozov, S. & Sardar, A.A. (2020). Role of Sunday Schools in peace education in Karachi. *Transdisciplinary Peace Praxis, 2*(2), 143-169.

McCartney, C. (2019). British Sunday schools: an educational arm of the churches, 1900–39. *Studies in Church History, 55*, 561-576.

McCormick, B., & Davenport, D. (2004). The leader as shepherd. *Executive Excellence*, *21*(2), 6.

Mehfooz, M. (2021). Religious Freedom in Pakistan: A Case Study of Religious Minorities. *Religions*, *12*(1), 51.

Muttaqin, D., Chanafi, A. R., Nofelia, B. I. A., Khristi, T. C., & Wahyuningsih, S. (2022). Role of parents and friends in adolescents' identity formation in Indonesia. *Indigenous: Jurnal Ilmiah Psikologi*, *7*(1), 1-14.

Niyozov, S. & Lalani, M. (2019). Peace education in Pakistan: Challenges and possibilities. In M. Drinkwater, F. Rizvi & K. Edge (Ed.), *Transnational perspectives on democracy, citizenship, human rights and peace education, 237.* Bloomsbury UK.

Palmer, J. (1880). *The Sunday School: Its History and Development.* Hamilton.

Raina, A. K. (2014). Minorities and representation in a plural society: *The case of the Christians of Pakistan. South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 37*(4), 684-699.

Rasiah, J. (2020). Jesuit schools in the archdiocese of Lahore, Pakistan: A service for the poor. *International Studies in Catholic Education*, *12*(1), 62-73.

Rasul, G., & Karki-Nepal, A. (2024). Addressing poverty and inequality in the mountains of Pakistan. *Discover Global Society*, *2*(1), 60.

Resane, K. T. (2020). Servant leadership and shepherd leadership: The missing dynamic in pastoral integrity in South Africa today. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, *76*(1).

Rizvi, S. (2010). *A transnational approach to educational leadership capacity building: a case study of the Masters of Education programme at Notre Dame Institute of Education, Karachi, Pakistan* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), Australian Catholic University.

Sardar, B., & Saeed, T. (2020). Cultural Dialogue between East and West Civilizations Through the Silk Road and the Role of Gandhara as a Melting Pot. *Quarterly Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, *68*(4).

Shaji, U. S. (2010). *Religions of India: a multidimentional study*. Cyber Tech Publications.

Simamora, R. (2023). The Impact of Media and Technology in Christian Religious Education Strategy. *Asian Journal of Philosophy and Religion*, *2*(2), 233-246.

Thaheem, S. K., Abidin, M. J. Z., Mirza, Q., & Pathan, H. U. (2021). Online teaching benefits and challenges during pandemic COVID-19: a comparative study of Pakistan and Indonesia. *Asian Education and Development Studies. 12*(9), 616.

Towns, E. L. (1979). *How to grow an effective Sunday school*. Liberty University.

United Kingdom: Home Office (2018). *Country Policy and Information Note Pakistan: Christians and Christian converts*, Version 3.0, September 2018.

Van den Berg, P. T., & Wilderom, C. P. (2004). Defining, measuring, and comparing organisational cultures. *Applied psychology*, *53*(4), 570-582.

Wessels, W. J. (2014). Leader responsibility in the workplace: Exploring the shepherd metaphor in the book of Jeremiah. *Koers*, *79*(2), 01-06.

Whitehead, K. D. (2010). *An analysis of the teaching aids provided for Sunday School teachers in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Brigham Young University.

Yates, P. (2016). Sunday schools and Welsh national identity: an historiographical study. In *Religion, Identity and Conflict in Britain: From the Restoration to the Twentieth Century* (pp. 93-104). Routledge.

Zendrato, M. D. A., Suharno, S., & Agung, L. (2020). Development of Christian character education based project based learning teaching materials to improve student character. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, *5*(3), 740-748