



Religious Education as a Catalyst for the Promotion of Peace and Harmony in Secondary Schools in North Central Region of Nigeria

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Abstract

The North Central region is known for its diverse religious and cultural landscape, has faced challenges related to inter-religious tensions and conflicts in educational institutions. The North Central region of Nigeria is home to a multitude of religious and cultural groups. Understanding and respecting this diversity is crucial for promoting peaceful coexistence. This study therefore, examine the role of religious education in promoting peace and harmony in secondary schools within the North Central Region of Nigeria. This study employs a descriptive survey design. The research involved 134,987 students and teachers from six selected schools in Niger and Plateau states. The study utilized simple random sampling and questionnaire-based data collection. Descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation was used to answer all the research questions. Findings from the analysis indicate a generally positive perception of religious education in addressing religious tensions, fostering understanding, and tolerance. The study affirms that religious education contributes to diversity appreciation, peaceful coexistence, and interfaith dialogue. Challenges identified include insufficient resources, lack of educator training, and curriculum gaps. The analysis suggests a potential positive influence of religious education on students' attitudes toward peace. Recommendations include allocating sufficient resources, organizing training for educators, periodic curriculum reviews, and community engagement initiatives to foster a comprehensive approach to promoting peace and harmony.

Keywords: Religious Education, Promotion of Peace and Harmony, Secondary School, North Central Region, Nigeria

Introduction

The cultural and social fabric of societies globally has been significantly influenced by religion throughout history. In the North Central Region of Nigeria, characterized by ethnic and religious diversity, historical tensions, and occasional conflicts, religious education plays a pivotal role in fostering peace and harmony. In Nigeria, a country known for its religious diversity, where Islam and Christianity are the dominant faiths, the role of religious education in secondary schools is of paramount importance (Ogunsanwo, 2005). Religious education is a vital component of the secondary school curriculum in Nigeria, as it not only imparts religious knowledge but also nurtures an understanding of different belief systems. It is in this educational space that the seeds of tolerance, respect, and interfaith dialogue can be sown. The North Central Region of Nigeria is home to a diverse population comprising various ethnic and religious groups, including Hausa, Fulani, Tiv, Idoma,

Nupe, among others. This diversity has, at times, led to communal conflicts, which underscores the urgency of

harnessing the power of religious education to foster peace and harmony (Oyebade, 2016).

Religious education equips students with knowledge of their own faith and that of others, enabling them to appreciate the differences and similarities in beliefs, practices, and values. This understanding paves the way for dialogue and cooperation, two essential elements in the promotion of peace and harmony. In this region, where religious identities are deeply intertwined with social and political dynamics, religious education can act as a counterbalance to extremist ideologies and ethno-religious tensions (Smith, 2018). Also, religious education in secondary schools can help bridge the gap between theoretical religious knowledge and practical moral values. The teachings of compassion, forgiveness, and love that are inherent in many religious



traditions can be used to shape the character of young individuals, inspiring them to become peacemakers within their communities. By promoting ethical behaviour and social responsibility, religious education can contribute to a culture of tolerance and respect that transcends religious boundaries (Hassan, 2014).

Religious education has the potential to be a powerful catalyst for the promotion of peace and harmony in the North Central Region of Nigeria. By nurturing understanding, dialogue, moral values, and a sense of social responsibility, it can help bridge religious divides and foster an environment where diversity is celebrated rather than a source of conflict (Imam, 2010). This study therefore, will explore the challenges and opportunities that educators and policymakers face in implementing a holistic religious education curriculum. To support this discussion, educators should actively engaged in promoting peace through religious education in Nigeria. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the role of religious education as a catalyst for the promotion of peace and harmony in senior secondary schools in North central region, Nigeria. The study examine the significant role that religious education can play in shaping the future of this region, ultimately contributing to a more peaceful and harmonious society.

Problem Statement

The North Central Region of Nigeria has witnessed various religious conflicts, often leading to violence, displacement, and mistrust among its inhabitants. These conflicts are rooted in religious differences, lack of understanding, and a failure to appreciate the teachings and values of various religious traditions. The absence of a comprehensive framework for religious education in the senior secondary school curriculum exacerbates these issues. Despite the region's rich religious tapestry, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding and appreciation of different faiths among students. This knowledge gap has contributed to misconceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices, fueling interfaith conflicts and hostility. Moreover, the region has experienced occasional outbreaks of violence and extremism, partly due to the vulnerability of young individuals who lack proper guidance in their moral and ethical development.

Religious education, a mandatory part of the secondary school curriculum in Nigeria, has the potential to mitigate these challenges. However, its role in promoting peace and harmony in the North Central Region remains largely underutilized. There is a

pressing need to assess the existing religious education curriculum, its content, and the pedagogical approaches used in secondary schools. Furthermore, it is essential to identify the barriers and challenges faced by educators and policymakers in effectively harnessing religious education as a tool for fostering interfaith understanding, ethical behaviour, and social responsibility. To address these issues, this research aims to investigate the current state of religious education in secondary schools in the North Central Region of Nigeria, its impact on students' perceptions of religious diversity, and the extent to which it contributes to the cultivation of values that promote peace and harmony. By identifying the gaps and challenges in religious education in this region, this study seeks to propose recommendations and strategies for enhancing the role of religious education as a catalyst for fostering a more inclusive, tolerant, and harmonious society.

Literature Review

The religious landscape in Nigeria has taken a disturbing turn, manifesting in violent incidents such as suicide bombings, the tragic loss of innocent lives, and widespread property damage. The region most profoundly impacted by terrorist attacks is the erstwhile North, which now includes the area referred to as the "Middle-Belt" of Nigeria. Despite the appearance of peace, there exists a backdrop of mutual suspicion and distrust between the two major religions in the country (Amadu, 2012). The North, in particular, grapples with recurring religious crises, often resulting in retaliatory actions in the Eastern part of Nigeria. Christians in the East, responding to these crises, launch reprisal attacks without distinguishing between religious affiliations. Consequently, both Christians and Muslims become victims of these reprisals, with North Christians experiencing significant casualties during these unfortunate events (Dzurgba, 2016). This alarming situation underscores the need for introspection and a reconsideration of the curriculum objectives in secondary school religious education in Nigeria. Such a reevaluation is seen as a potential measure to mitigate religious conflicts and address factors that hinder religious dialogue, which some consider the last resort for resolving conflicts among the three major religions in Nigeria.

Without doubt, religious education becomes imperative in curbing conflicts in Nigeria. In fact, conflict resolution requires adequate religious education in curriculum implementation in various tiers

of educational system in Nigeria. As stated by Akubue (2016), religious education serves the purpose of cultivating individuals with well-ordered personalities or strong character for the nation. It aims to instill social norms that bind society together and reinforce a commitment to socially desirable behavior. This, in turn, contributes to the development of sustainable behavior in Nigeria (Uche, 2015). Viewing religious education as a potent tool for social change and liberation, Mordi (2012) suggests that it has the potential to transform even the most criminally inclined individuals in various societies. This transformation is achieved through the teachings of religious beliefs, values, morality, and ethics. Given that religion functions as a tool for social control, it is advocated that religious education in Nigeria, particularly in secondary schools, should actively encourage students to engage in activities and responsibilities centered around promoting peace and fulfilling roles as religious functionaries.

For example, Imams and pastors are instruments of social control through their spreading of God message, praying for members, counseling among others. Religious education serves as an instrument of social order, shaping societal behavior through the teaching and promotion of religious traditions. This involves establishing restrictions, encouraging prohibitions, and fostering peace initiatives. By emphasizing these principles, religious education contributes to the maintenance of law and order, crucial elements for effective conflict resolution. Through the preaching of peace and adherence to the laws of the land, religious education creates an environment conducive to business prosperity (Mordi, 2012). Furthermore, religious education plays a significant role in resolving conflicts among people. It imparts teachings on forgiveness, promotes truth, builds confidence, and fosters commitment among individuals. These moral values not only contribute to peaceful coexistence but also serve as instrumental factors in conflict resolution and nation-building in Nigeria.

Despite the potential role of religious education in resolving conflicts in Nigeria, there are issues of religious sentiment among secondary school students in the country. This is exemplified by the high level of moral decay and insurgencies within the nation, indicating a deficiency in religious teaching in the secondary school system. Unfortunately, numerous countries, Nigeria included, are grappling with crises of diverse dimensions, resulting in the loss of both human

capital and material resources. This is attributed to the inadequacy, ineffectiveness, and misunderstanding of religious education within Nigeria's educational curriculum objectives (Ajaegbu, 2017). The prolonged absence of peace in Nigeria has hindered economic growth, crucial for sustainable development. The country is currently confronted with various security challenges, including religious extremism, insurgencies, communal clashes, armed robbery, abductions, kidnappings, and political violence. Consequently, Nigeria is perceived as a security risk, with many foreign advisories cautioning their citizens against traveling to the country. Violent conflicts between different ethnic groups further compound the challenges faced by Nigeria.

Instances of conflict in Nigeria are numerous and diverse. The Ife-Modakeke crisis in Osun State, the Jukun-Tiv war in Taraba State, the Odi Massacre in Bayelsa State, and the Urhobo, Izon, Itsekiri crisis in Warri are examples (Sulaiman and Ojo, 2018). Religion, too, has been misused as a source of conflict in the country, with a pronounced religious consciousness. In Nigeria, religious identities are commonly categorized into three groups: Christian, Muslim, and Traditional. Religious conflicts, particularly between Muslims and Christians with evident ethnic undertones, have been a persistent feature of the North Nigerian political landscape since the 1980s (Ajaegbu, 2017). Notable examples include the Kaduna riot in February 2000, triggered by attempts to implement Sharia law, resulting in about 300 deaths within the first two days of the crisis (Jando, 2011). In September 2001, a crisis in Jos claimed over 1,000 lives (Okafor, 2015). Ethnic and religious conflicts in 2001 displaced about 500,000 people, with an additional 250,000 displaced in 2002 (Isiramen, 2017).

Further instances include the conflict in Maiduguri, Borno State, on February 18, 2006, where over 50 people were killed, and properties were damaged in the clash between Christians and Muslims. In 2008, a religious crisis in Jos, Plateau State, resulted in over 700 fatalities and the internal displacement of thousands (Sampson, 2012). These incidents underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of conflicts in Nigeria, involving a combination of religious, ethnic, and political factors. The emergence of Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria has significantly escalated the rate of conflicts, causing devastating impacts on the nation's economy. The insurgency has severely affected both human and material resources crucial for credible development. The killing and

displacement of people, particularly in the North East, have deprived the region of vital means of production, with a cumulative adverse effect on the overall development of the country.

Boko Haram attacks have been rampant, and one notable incident occurred from July 26 to 30, 2009, when Bauchi, Borno, Kano, and Yobe were targeted by the radical sect. This attack resulted in the loss of over 700 lives, with 3,500 people internally displaced, 392 women widowed, and numerous properties destroyed. Another tragic event was the bomb explosion at St Theresa's Catholic Church in Madalla, Niger State, on December 25, 2011, causing many casualties and injuries (Onah, Ibenwa, and Okwuosa, 2016). The continuous activities of Boko Haram have not only disrupted the peace and stability of the affected regions but have also posed significant challenges to the socio-economic development of Nigeria as a whole. The undeniable connection between peace and sustainable development is highlighted by these situations. To achieve meaningful development in Nigeria, it is imperative to implement peace-building initiatives due to the country's instability and volatility. Given that peace is a fundamental tenet in the teachings of most religions in Nigeria, there should be an increased emphasis on religious education. This educational focus is essential for the necessary transformation to occur, as religion plays a crucial role in nurturing spiritual qualities that foster peaceful coexistence among people. Therefore, this study tends to examine the role of religious education as a catalyst for the promotion of peace and harmony in secondary schools in the North Central Region of Nigeria.

Research Questions

This study would provide answers to the following research questions.

1. How is religious education currently taught in secondary schools in the North Central Region of Nigeria?
2. What are the attitudes and perceptions of students and educators towards religious education in the context of promoting peace and harmony?
3. What challenges and opportunities exist in integrating religious education as a catalyst for peace and harmony in the region's schools?

Methodology

This study employs descriptive survey design to examine the role of religious education as a catalyst for the promotion of peace and harmony in secondary schools in the North Central Region of Nigeria. The study was conducted within the North Central region of Nigeria. The population of the study consists of 81,242 students and teachers in secondary schools in Niger state and 53,745 students and teachers in Plateau states respectively to make up a total of 134,987 formed the population under investigation. Simple random sampling techniques were used to select two hundred and fifty (250) respondents in the area. Questionnaire was used to collect useful information from the students and teachers in the three (3) secondary schools in Niger state and three (3) secondary schools in Plateau states to make up six (6) schools for the study. Three experts from the Religious Department at the University of Ilorin, Ilorin, validated the instrument. A pilot study was conducted, wherein the instrument was administered as a trial test and later repeated as a post-test after a few weeks. This process aimed to assess the reliability of the instrument and involved three research assistants were used to administer the instrument. Descriptive statistics of Mean and Standard Deviation were employed to answer all the research questions.

Results

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on the Religious Education Currently Taught in Secondary Schools

S/N	Items	N250		
		\bar{X}	SD	Decision
1	The teaching of religious education in secondary schools effectively covers a wide range of religious perspectives.	3.13	1.18	Accepted

2	Religious education courses adequately address the cultural diversity.	3.41	1.31	Accepted
3	The current religious education curriculum in secondary schools provides a balanced and unbiased view of different religious beliefs.	3.25	1.28	Accepted
4	Teachers incorporate interactive and engaging methods to facilitate religious education learning among students.	3.01	1.19	Accepted

The data in Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of responses on how religious education currently taught in secondary schools in the North Central Region of Nigeria. In summary, the findings suggest a generally positive perception of how religious education is currently taught in secondary

schools in the North Central Region of Nigeria. The "Accepted" decisions indicate that, on average, respondents find the various aspects of religious education to be satisfactory based on the provided criteria.

Table Two: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on the Attitudes and Perceptions of Students And Educators Towards Religious Education in the Context of Promoting Peace and Harmony N250

S/n	Items	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
1	Students believe that religious education contributes positively to fostering understanding and tolerance among different religious communities.	3.22	1.24	Accepted
2	Educators think that incorporating religious education in the curriculum enhances students' appreciation for diversity and promotes peaceful coexistence.	3.38	1.36	Accepted
3	Students express a willingness to engage in interfaith dialogue as a result of their religious education experiences.	3.12	1.17	Accepted
4	Educators believe that religious education plays a crucial role in reducing religious intolerance and conflicts among students.	3.28	1.23	Accepted

Table 2 provides the results of a survey on the attitudes and perceptions of students and educators towards religious education in the context of promoting peace and harmony. In summary, the findings suggest that both students and educators generally hold positive attitudes and perceptions towards religious education in

the context of promoting peace and harmony. The "Accepted" decisions indicate a favourable consensus among respondents regarding the positive impact of religious education on understanding, tolerance, diversity appreciation, peaceful coexistence, and interfaith dialogue.

Table Three: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on the Challenges and Opportunities Exist In Integrating Religious Education as a Catalyst for Peace and Harmony N250

S/n	Items	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
1	Insufficient resources and support hinder the effective integration of religious education for promoting peace in schools.	3.27	1.31	Accepted

2	Educators face challenges in addressing diverse religious perspectives in the classroom due to lack of training and resources.	3.14	1.19	Accepted
3	There are opportunities for collaboration and joint initiatives among schools, religious leaders, and communities to enhance the impact of religious education on peace building.	3.36	1.38	Accepted
4	The existing curriculum does not adequately address the contemporary issues related to religion and conflicts in the region.	3.17	1.29	Accepted

Table 2 presents the results of a survey on the challenges and opportunities exist in integrating religious education as a catalyst for peace and harmony in the region's schools. In summary, the findings suggest that there is a consensus among respondents about the challenges and opportunities in integrating religious education as a catalyst for peace and harmony in the region's schools. The "Accepted" decisions indicate an agreement among respondents regarding the identified challenges such as insufficient resources and support, lack of training for educators, and curriculum gaps, as well as opportunities for collaboration to enhance the impact of religious education on peace building.

Discussions

The findings from Table 1 suggest a generally positive perception of how religious education is currently taught in secondary schools in the North Central Region of Nigeria. This aligns with the literature review, emphasizing the need for religious education in promoting peace and harmony, especially in regions marked by religious tensions (Amadu, 2012; Dzurgba, 2016). The study indicates that religious education plays a crucial role in addressing the religious crises in Nigeria by fostering understanding and tolerance.

Table 2 reveals positive attitudes and perceptions among both students and educators regarding the role of religious education in promoting peace and harmony. This aligns with the literature, which underscores the instrumental role of religious education in conflict resolution and the development of well-ordered personalities (Akubue, 2016; Uche, 2015). The study affirms that religious education contributes to fostering diversity appreciation, peaceful coexistence, and interfaith dialogue.

The findings in Table 3 indicate a consensus among respondents on the challenges and opportunities

in integrating religious education for peace and harmony. These challenges, such as insufficient resources and support, lack of educator training, and curriculum gaps, are consistent with the literature, highlighting issues in religious education implementation (Ajaegbu, 2017). The study emphasizes the need for collaboration to enhance the impact of religious education on peace building.

The analysis suggests a potential influence of religious education on peace among students in the North Central Region is crucial. The literature review supports the idea that religious education promotes conflict resolution by instilling moral values, forgiveness, and commitment (Mordi, 2012). Furthermore, the result indicates that religious education impact on the attitudes and perceptions of students and educators regarding its role in promoting peace and harmony. The literature review emphasizes the role of religious education in maintaining social order and promoting conflict resolution through the teaching of traditions and moral values (Mordi, 2012). It is therefore essential to reinforce the commitment to religious education for peace and harmony.

Conclusion

Conclusively, addressing religious conflicts in Nigeria requires different approach, and religious education stands as a key component in this endeavour. The study has discuss the current state of religious education in secondary schools in the North Central Region of Nigeria and its perceived impact on peace and harmony. The findings generally indicate a positive perception of how religious education is taught and a favourable consensus on its role in fostering understanding, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence among students and educators. However, the study also identified challenges, including insufficient resources, lack of training for educators, and curriculum gaps, which hinder the effective integration of religious

education as a catalyst for peace and harmony. The underscore the need for stakeholders to contribute to the promotion of peace and harmony in the North Central Region and beyond, laying the foundation for a more tolerant and cohesive society.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations;

1. Educational authorities should allocate sufficient resources to support the effective teaching of religious education. Adequate funding can contribute to the development of quality curriculum materials, training programs for educators, and infrastructure improvement.
2. Given the importance of religious education in promoting peace, the Government should organise workshops and seminars for educators to receive regular training to enhance their skills in teaching religious education with a focus on peace-building. Workshops, seminars, and continuous professional development programs can equip educators with the necessary tools to navigate sensitive topics and promote a culture of understanding among students.
3. Educational policymakers should consider periodic reviews of the religious education curriculum to ensure its relevance and alignment with the goals of promoting peace and harmony. Collaboration among stakeholders, including religious leaders, educators, and community representatives, can contribute to a comprehensive and culturally sensitive curriculum.
4. Initiatives to promote peace and harmony should extend beyond the school environment. Engaging local communities in dialogue, awareness campaigns, and collaborative projects can create a holistic approach to fostering understanding and tolerance.

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