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Promoting Ethnic and Religious Diversity for the Nigerian School Children:

A Preliminary Study

Abstract

The aim of this study is to provide evidence on the school library as an important medium for promoting ethnic and religious diversity among the Nigerian school children. Though the issue of diversity continues to evolve and expand in the 21st century to include dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, culture, abilities, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age and religious preferences (Perrault & Mardis, 2015), the Nigerian nation is presently being troubled by the crisis related to ethnic and religious groups. The education system seems not to be doing much in encouraging coexistence among the citizens. The school library serves as a safe place for addressing these issues of ethnicity and religiosity among learners from diverse backgrounds in the Nigerian school system in which the school timetable is busy with a lot of passive learning activities. Even though ethnic and religious diversity should be addressed in a normal classroom environment, there is still a continuous rise in the lack of ethnic and religious coexistence in Nigerian community which has brought about religious rivalry and ethnic bigotry in the different communities of the nation (Akwanya, 2015; Ojo, 2016). This has continually led to a greater output of school children who are not ready to welcome other cultures and religious beliefs when they become adults; thus steering violence among other members of the community.

Keywords: Nigeria, diversity, ethnicity, school libraries

Generally, Nigerian society has witnessed serious issues of insecurity with regards to ethnic and religious intolerance; with the major ethnic groups and beyond, forming their militant groups such as the Boko Haram, with much hatred and an inability to tolerate the western culture (Obiekezie & Timothy, 2015). In this case, the authors noted that one major factor behind the problem of ethnic and religious violence is prejudice, the “magnification and demonization of difference” (p. 55). When these issues that pertain to culture and religion are addressed among the schoolchildren and religious and ethnic coexistence encouraged, prejudice would minimize; thus, children would live and grow with tolerance of all humans and their neighbours, ready to

accept differences among individuals. The school library is an avenue for encouraging diversity of all types, be it religious, cultural, social, political, gender and gender identity, varying abilities and special needs.

The school library is an instrument for addressing the issues of ethnic and religious diversity, while encouraging peace, unity and coexistence among school children from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. The school library is a space for fostering cultural appreciation (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), 2015), where children from different backgrounds are provided with a space and opportunities to share their different and unique culture; thus imbibing in them the vital principles of peaceful living among themselves in school and outside the school community. The school library's role goes beyond developing academic abilities and various career skills. The school builds lifelong skills (Onyebuchi, 2010), skills that would enable the child to function effectively in the society. Without imparting these skills of peaceful coexistence in a child, they may grow into adults who lack moral and ethical values and who see others are not worth living. Part of the objectives of the school library as stated by the American Library Association (ALA) is to support equal access to information for all persons as well as address the issues of diversity of the community in which the library serves which include cultural barriers, barriers relating to attitudes, racism, discrimination on the grounds of appearance, ethnic and religious backgrounds, among others (Itsekor, 2012).

School children, by their nature, learn easily and therefore need to be en-cultured and acculturated with the appreciation of other people's culture and build to work and interact with as well as respect other children's ethnic and religious beliefs. The development that happens in a child takes a dynamic and interactive process; thus the need for child learning to address cultural differences (Bournemouth University, 2018). When there is increasing awareness of ethnic and religious diversity in children's thinking, there is the tendency for more peaceful coexistence among them; hence ushering them to an increased positive participation when they grow up. The National Policy on Education (Nigeria, 2014) also provided for Nigerian education where children are trained to appreciate and live together with other members in the school and the larger community. This is intended to be achieved through different activities in the school. In the dearth of curriculum to help realize this, the school library becomes a unique setting for realizing and nurturing ethnic and religious understanding among school children so as to prepare them for positive participation in the larger community. Despite being a centre for instilling understanding of ethnic and religious diversity for peaceful coexistence among children, the role of the school library seems not to be clearly understood; especially with the failure on the part of class teachers to actualize this goal of the Nigerian education system due to the dearth in time and space on the school timetable. Thus, the importance of the school library for appreciating ethnic and religious diversity (Ngwuchukwu, Onyebuchi & Okonkwo, 2019). Much more worrisome is the fact that texts provided in schools do not

cover much on the heterogeneity of religion and ethnicity; and the ones included were meant to inform on the existence of those ethnic groups. The school libraries which could organize different resources and activities for upholding ethnic and religious diversity are sidelined and not made functional in most cases. For cultural and religious differences to be addressed and better appreciated, the school library should be made to create a forum, and provide resources and activities that are more interactive, collaborative and practice-based learning areas of diverse cultural and religious activities so as to continuously inculcate in them the understanding of and passion for peaceful coexistence among school children for positive participation in the society after school (Ternenge & Agipu, 2019; Onyebuchi & Ngwuchukwu, 2013; Dike, Ngwuchukwu & Onyebuchi, 2010).

Research Objective

The main objective of the study is to embark on a preliminary study on the place of the Nigerian school libraries in promoting ethnic and religious diversity for school children; especially public schools from the three major areas of the Nigerian languages. This is because the children who graduate from the public schools tend to come from disadvantaged backgrounds and may likely be the most often used tools for hostile actions and attacks during ethnic and religious-related national crises than the private schools. The study therefore seeks to address the following questions in relation to the stated objectives:

1. What aspects of ethnic and religious diversity need to be addressed in Nigerian schools?
2. What provision does Nigerian Basic Education have for addressing issues of ethnic and religious diversity?
3. What resources and programmes can school libraries provide to address issues of ethnic and religious diversity in Nigeria?
4. What challenges do school libraries encounter in promoting ethnic and religious understanding among Nigerian school children?

Methods

A purposive sample of 6 professional librarians (two respectively) who serve as volunteers in school library development from the three major ethnic groups, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba were selected to participate in the interview study. Two reasons informed this choice of the sample size: first being the fact that these selected groups are actively involved in school library development in their area, and therefore would be in a better position to provide information on the state of the public school libraries in their areas. The second reason was the limited time for recruiting, programming, administering and analyzing the data realized from the interview. Many observations, experiences, obstacles and best practices of this group of professionals were seen as examples of school libraries contributing to fostering an understanding of ethnic and religious diversity for more peaceful coexistence for Nigerian school children in particular and the community at large.

The respondents for the interview were enlisted from the Nigerian School Library Association (NSLA), an organization that brings together all school librarians from the different parts of the country, including those at the primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. One unifying factor of the NSLA is that the members are also volunteers in school library development. Four of the respondents work in tertiary institutions while two others work at the Ministry of Education. The professional librarians who were sampled have volunteered in building school libraries for an average of at least ten years. Self-structured interview guides were used in which the respondents were required to provide answers to questions that concern aspects of ethnic and religious diversity that need to be addressed in Nigerian schools, the provision of the Nigerian Basic Education for addressing the issues of ethnic and religious diversity, school library resources and programmes available for addressing issues of ethnic and religious diversity as well as their challenges and best practices. The interviews were conducted in June 2021. Phone-in was used for participants. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The quotes were coded as SL1–SL6 (Where SL represents School Librarian and 1-6 represents the serial numbers of the six (6) school librarians included in the study. Analyses of the results from the interviews were done as narratives (with quotes provided where necessary). The reason for using these quotes is because the participants are in the best position to provide information on the role of the school library in promoting and addressing the issue of ethnic and religious diversity in the school community. The use of numbers was for easy identification so the names of the interviewees were made anonymous.

Analysis and Findings

The Nigerian professional librarians have continuously searched for ways of promoting ethnic and religious diversity among school children, thus ameliorating the lack of peaceful coexistence in the society. The school library resources and services are meant to address this issue where the school curriculum may not comprehensively cover the content of the school curriculum which is meant to tackle the issues of lack of proper understanding of uniqueness of individual ethnic and religious belief. These professional and school librarians have greatly involved themselves in school library development, where they donate reading materials to school libraries around their community, organize programmes and services that foster understanding among the school children, and much more.

Research Question 1:

What are the major issues of ethnic and religious diversity confronting Nigeria? Respondents said that part of the major issues of ethnic diversity confronting Nigerian society are mainly lack of awareness and negative disposition towards other ethnic groups. People only know their own people personally. Ignorance, prejudice and intolerance are basic to the issues of ethnic and religious diversity confronting Nigeria. “We tend to view other ethnic groups (even sub-groups within ethnic groups, like people from various areas and towns) in terms of negative stereotypes

and generalizations, often based on ignorance or a few cases of negative experience” (SL1). Lack of cultural orientation is an issue that really contributes to this general ethnic misunderstanding. People misrepresent other people’s cultural differences and this brings about a crisis in the country. In Nigeria, many ethnic groups exist, including Yoruba, Nupe, Kakanda, Gbagyi, Hausa, Kambari, Kamuku, Bussawa, Dakarkari, Igbo, Efik, Tiv, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Igala, Ijaw, Fulani and Ibibio among others. The inability of the different groups to fully understand others has continuously led to ethnic disintegration; thus, “an inability to appreciate the different ethnic groups’ cultural norms and values, their traditional practices as well as their religious beliefs has led to actions that promote hatred among the different cultures” (SL4). The problems of ignorance and prejudice are even more intense and dangerous with religious diversity. Religion is a serious factor troubling the Nigerian society today. To take Nigeria’s two major religions, I have heard Christians accuse Muslims of being idolators, which anyone with the least knowledge of Islam knows is absurd. Their abhorrence of idolatry is like the ancient Jews, which is why they forbid all human or animal images in art. On the other hand, during religious violence, Muslim mobs may demand that Christians curse Jesus, when their own religion honours him as a principal prophet. Ignorance! Most of my examples are Christian because that's what I know better (SL1). There is also insufficient parental involvement in the issue of ethnic and religious diversity. Christian families are not free to visit Muslim families or traditional families and vice versa. You may be required to take off your shoes when you go to a Muslim house. This affects the intimacy that should exist between people from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Again, gender is also an issue in religious diversity. You find out that some religions restrict women from even movement and visiting people as well as people visiting them. Thus, one of the respondents has this to say: “The major problems of ethnic and religious diversity are lack of proper understanding of what our belief system is, the shallow knowledge of the people in charge (may be our religious leaders) and the failure of parents’ to properly handle all that relates to religion” (SL3).

Research Question 2:

What provision does the Nigerian Basic Education have for addressing issues of ethnic and religious diversity? According to some of the respondents, the Nigerian education system provided for cultural orientation and ethnic diversity as part of the contents of ethnic and religious diversity which education will address to foster active participation and coexistence among the citizens. However, the content of the curriculum does not give room for in-depth treatment of issues as it relates to peaceful coexistence. It was noted earlier that though parents may want their children to associate with children from different ethnic backgrounds, they find it difficult to allow them to learn about other religions since they are afraid of losing their children to those religious beliefs. In school, this scenario is worsened by lack of basic knowledge of the positive aspects of other ethnic and religious practices.

According to the respondents, especially from the school, the Nigerian educational systems provided for this in the Social Studies, Civic Education and History subjects which are studied in primary schools. According to one, the school curriculum is playing a great role with the introduction of Civic Education among subjects offered in the schools. Promotion of Cultural programmes (like Cultural Day) is another way through which the children appreciate other people's culture and way of life (SL4). One of the respondents, however, regrets that social studies have been removed from the school curriculum, and part of it integrated with religion; the cogent aspects are not well treated. Another regrets that the issue of religious diversity is very worrisome in schools. Thus, each takes the most problematic verses of the other's scripture & cites them as the essence of the religion; for instance, verses justifying violence against people. Christians hand-pick stray and typical violent verses from the Qur'an and overlook the larger message, forgetting similar passages from our Old Testament (slaughter of Amorites & other people). Most Christians don't see this as the message of Christianity, but we take any similar stray verse from the Qur'an as essential Islam. Or, "take one narrow definition rather than looking at the broader concept (e.g. Jihad), which can be understood in a number of ways... I can assure you, the current curriculum is completely deficient in this!" (SL1). The Islamic religion is not being taught in a Christian school and vice versa, except for criticism. Christian Religious Knowledge is the only religion that is taught in a predominantly Christian school background, while Islamic Religious Studies is taught in schools with a Moslem background.

Even when taught, a participant stated that most time: "The teachers are mainly concerned with the most problematic verses of the scripture from the other religion and cites them as the part of that religion that supports violence against people; but we fail to see the parts of history that emphasize tolerance (especially in past Islamic societies) and consequences of negative disposition towards others (most often stated in Christians scripture)" (SL6). The religious leaders have also helped in advocating division among children in the name of differences in belief, where it seems like a taboo to expose children to literature that will promote religious harmony. It becomes difficult to organize interreligious dialogue platforms for children, because, even adults are not allowed to read a book that is not related to held religious belief. Again, "we don't understand the diversity within Islam but only think of rampaging mobs as what Muslims are" (SL5). Worthy of mention is the Crusades, forced conversion or expulsion of Muslims & Jews from Spain, forced conversion and violence against indigenous peoples in the Americas & enslaved Africans. From this broader historical perspective, we might build a more realistic model for a diverse and tolerant society (SL1).

Research Question 3:

What resources and programmes can school libraries provide to address issues of ethnic and religious diversity in Nigeria? School libraries have a lot of roles to play in fostering religious and ethnic coexistence among school children; more so, since the issue could be readdressed

from their foundational level. The participants are of the opinion that school libraries as advocates of positive living and peaceful coexistence, could come in. It was noted that in some major cities, school children are provided with resources that assist in harnessing peaceful coexistence among them; however, most of the other areas are where the misunderstanding is at its peak, and the school library should stand in the gap. But what to do for those who don't have these opportunities, like many at the primary level? School libraries can mount programs bringing in people from other ethnic & religious groups to share their culture and what their religion means to them. Where such people are not around, perhaps groups like NSLA or government agencies like the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) and the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) can promote exchanges of online programs, videos & slide shows, printed or even self-made materials to be shared nation-wide. Production of such resources would be a benefit for libraries and schools (SL1). According to her, this calls for integration of such resources with the curriculum in relevant subjects (such as history, cultural arts, civics, religious knowledge & "national values", i.e., social studies) with emphasis on deepening the appreciation for ethnic and religious diversity.

Research Question 4:

What challenges do school libraries encounter in promoting ethnic and religious understanding among Nigerian school children? There is a need to begin the re-orientation. Children need to be made to know that within Nigeria, individuals vary tremendously. They should be made to understand the good aspects of the different cultures as well as to know that many variations exist within each ethnic group, Sunni and Shiite. If we look beyond northern Nigeria, large groups of Muslims follow more tolerant and open-minded forms of Islam, as in Mali, Morocco, Tanzania and Indonesia, for just four examples; in fact, much of the Muslim world (but not the variety from Saudi Arabia, which many northern Nigerians seem to have adopted) (SL1). This is why personal interaction is so important. Outside of diverse communities (like Lagos), Nigeria has tried here with unity schools and National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) but these are increasingly problematic. A participant reports: "I've heard reports from a number sent to the north for NYSC. Around 1990 we had two students from Sokoto, now Zamfara State, who did so much to broaden my understanding and that of Library and Information Science students". Conferences of associations like Nigerian School Library Association (NSLA) and Nigerian Library Association (NLA) can foster understanding and friendship across ethnic and religious lines (SL1). Information resources are very necessary in addressing the issues of ethnic and religious rivalry among children. A participant states: "The School Library has a role. I remember when we were young, we read such books like "Children in Netherlander" and "Eskimo children". In any part of the country, providing school library resources is a key thing here (SL2). History Books and Scripture Literature should be provided in the school libraries. Story Books for all ages should be purchased for the children in which the story portrays the different ethnic and religious squabbles. Advocacy is another great way of realizing this. Preaching the gospel of peaceful coexistence among the school children through the

library-related programmes like the international day events, holiday programmes, national programmes and through the use of library resources. This is advocacy on the part of the school librarians to the government, parents and school children generally. As school library advocates, reaching out to the communities is relevant. This is to meet the ethnic-related information needs of people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds and providing information that addresses the need for understanding among individuals from diverse backgrounds (SL4).

Discussion

The researcher looked into the aspects of ethnic and religious diversity prevalent in the Nigerian school community with emphasis on major issues such as having a negative attitude towards people of other religious backgrounds. This was in an attempt to answer the research questions that were designed for the purpose of this study. The findings showed that parents, the educational system and religious organizations are not doing enough work to address the issue of ethnic and religious diversity in the Nigerian school community; thus, the lack of peaceful coexistence in the community. Aspects of ethnic and religious diversity need to be addressed in Nigerian schools. Ethnic and religious conflict is one great factor of insecurity in the Nigerian community today. Yakubu and Rothfuss, 2012 (as cited in Onah, Diara & Uroko, 2017) stated that religious conflict is most prevalent in the northern region, an area that is more like a “hotbed of religious extremism” (p. 62) where people are scampering for safety. This turbulence has taken its toll on other parts of the country where people are not certain of the state of security at any point in time.

The first part of the study tried to view the aspects of ethnic and religious diversity that need to be addressed. It is clear from the data collected that the lack of ethnic and religious understanding could be attributed to lack of cultural orientation, poor level of education, insufficient parental involvement in improving children’s ethnic and religious knowledge, negative attitudes of some of religious leaders, ignorance, prejudice as well as intolerance. This agrees with Onah, Diara and Uroko, 2017 who stated that appreciation for different ethnicities and religions should form the core of “moral teachings of religions such as love for one another, honesty, neighbourliness, justice, tolerance, peace, unity and sanctity of human life. This will foster peaceful co-existence” (p. 66). When the people involved do not exhibit positive attitudes and understanding for ethnic and religious differences, the entire society may not be habitable or safe for the citizenry, thus, leading to continuous rivalry and unrest for the entire nation. Part of the major ethnic group, the Almajiris, who are always found begging in the streets, are always stirring up violence to destroy other ethnic groups (Osakwe 2017); and this can be clearly seen in their school where they are not exposed to the uniqueness of other ethnic groups.

The Nigerian educational system is deficient in her curriculum provision for exposing the unique features of the different ethnic and religious groups in the nation. The findings show that

the major content of the educational curriculum is on the different modes of dressing, the three major languages and their marriage styles. Many cultural norms and values of peaceful coexistence are left out in the training, leaving the school children ignorant of the positive aspects of other people's culture. The important aspects which could be exposed to children would end up being skipped. Again, as a heterogeneous society, the country mainly practices Islam and Christianity as major religions and with some practising traditional religion (Yusuf, 2021). Islamic and Christian religious conflicts have had a heavy impact on the people, according to the author, and this has affected the nation both in loss of lives and through loss of educational values, social displacement, and psychological trauma. Worse still, children are not exposed to in-depth treatment of ethnic and religious harmony through the creation of interreligious dialogue platforms in schools. The end product according to Afolabi, 2016 is to allow personalization of religion, insistence on religious conversion and hegemony, and continuous increase of illiteracy. When the Yoruba, Nupe, Kakanda, Gbagyi, Hausa, Kambari, Kamuku, Bussawa, Dakarkari, Igbo, Efik, Tiv, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Igala, Ijaw, Fulani, Ibibio and other ethnic groups in Nigeria as well as the Muslims, Christian, traditional and other religions that abound in the country come together through dialogue to resolve their differences, the entire Nigerian communities would become a co-habitable nation in the midst of diverse ethnic groups.

Resources and programmes which school libraries could provide would address issues of ethnic and religious diversity in Nigeria. School libraries have a key role to play in promoting ethnic and religious diversity among school children and in the school community in general. Findings from the study show that the school libraries can provide fiction, non-fiction, reference and audiovisual material resources to foster understanding and knowledge of ethnic and religious diversity among children within the school community. This agrees with the International Federation of Library Association's (IFLA, 2015) guideline which states that school libraries should acquire resources "that have been created both locally and internationally and that reflect the national, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, indigenous, and other unique population identities of members of the school community" (p. 8). Among other resources the school libraries should have are history books, scripture literature and story books for children and all ages.

Books that tell about aspects of Islam and Christianity (and traditional religions) for all children (also Judaism, about which there is also considerable ignorance; and even other religions like Hinduism and Buddhism), portraying what they have in common, differences, core values, practice – from the cultural and religion perspective. Further, the finding suggested that a round-table discussion platform, interfaith dialogue programme, historical storytelling, watching shows, and regular scripture readings could be part of the services and programmes introduced in the school libraries as a means of addressing the ethnic and religious issues in the society. Thus, Benard and Dulle (2014) agree that libraries are social institutions created to

safeguard knowledge, preserve the cultural heritage and provide information for education and research purposes to different users.

Challenges for school libraries with promoting ethnic and religious diversity

Findings show that just as society (parents, religious institutions, educational system, e.t.c.) is not meeting expectations with regards to addressing ethnic and religious diversity, the school library's role is also being neglected. Teacher-librarians are not being recognized in schools to help facilitate discussions on ethnic and religious diversity.

This is prevalent in public schools. Schools, where there are libraries, are not equipped with necessary resources for promoting ethnic and religious understanding among school children. School library advocates are also developing programmes that would foster ethnic and religious coexistence in schools; an example is a programme for information literacy developed for primary school children (Onyebuchi & Ngwuchukwu, 2013; Dike, Ngwuchukwu & Onyebuchi, 2011) for cultural appreciation and effective academic realization; and a national library curriculum which has also been developed and is awaiting implementation.

Clergy men across all faiths in the country should improve on sensitization of children to accommodate one another irrespective of ethnic or religious belief. There is a lot of interest from volunteers in making the school library a second home for children but due to issues of funding, it is a dream that is still being pursued. One day the school library section of the State library will be upgraded to the generally desired state.

Way Forward

In order to overcome the challenges of ethnic and religious conflict, parents, religious leaders, school authority, educational administrators, and school librarians should go back to the drawing board. Firstly, the school library role ought to be recognized as a space for promoting understanding among children and people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Secondly, the school/teacher librarians should continue to advocate for peaceful coexistence among people from different ethnic groups. Without addressing the issues of ethnic and religious differences from the foundational stage of a child, there may continue to be turbulence in the society.

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