

Refocusing the Social Studies Curriculum for Religious Tolerance, Unity and Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria

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I. Introduction

The state of peace and tolerance in Nigeria is gradually collapsing and the nation is gradually disintegrating. The clamor by many eminent Nigerians for a sovereign national conference, spells doom for the once united 'giant of Africa'. The unity and peaceful coexistence of Nigeria is under the threat of collapse by the growing level of religious intolerance. The increase in religious conflicts has led to the loss and destruction of many lives and properties. According to Williams (2004), religious intolerance seems to be the cause of most wars and sufferings in the world. The on-going religious violence unleashed on many Nigerians especially in the northern part of the country by the fundamental Islamic sects, the Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, popularly known as Boko Haram's insurgency, mainly in northern Nigeria, has left more than 3,600 people dead since 2009. There is an increasing need to unite the citizenry despite the odds against her peaceful coexistence. There is need to ensure that Nigeria remains a united entity where all citizens will see themselves first as Nigerians before seeing themselves in the light of their ethnic group or religious affiliations. Religious conflicts, has caused a wide spread of suspicion and distrust among the various ethnic and religious groups in the country. The increasing perception of some parts of the country as 'dangerous' due to its restiveness, has led to skepticism and suspicion, which inhibits cooperation (Otuenu 2011). This further confirms one of the predictions implied in Huntington's (1996) thesis, that conflicts that occur on the fault lines between major religions will run a higher risk of spreading across borders due to kinship alliances and intra-civilizations solidarity. The inauguration of the council of Inter-religious harmony by the Federal government stands out as one of the government's effort to ensure peace and stability within the adherents of the two major religions (Christianity and Islam) in Nigeria. The Council of Inter-religious Harmony is co-headed by the president of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs and the national president of the Christian Association of Nigeria. Despite all efforts made by the government to ensure peace and stability within the country, there have been several pockets of violent clashes among the followers of the two religious groups.

The re-orientation of Nigerians to seek non-violent means of conflict resolution is becoming necessary. There is a growing need to re-awaken the spirit of religious tolerance, unity and peaceful coexistence through the teaching and learning of Social Studies education. Social Studies education seeks to de-emphasize less those things which widens the gaps between individuals within a country, while emphasizing more strongly the path that creates unity, tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Ogunsanya (1984:6) posited that "the experience of many countries of the world where Social Studies was introduced showed that such countries were motivated to do so by the felt need to get rid of certain social vices plaguing their countries and which they believed Social Studies will contribute in eliminating". The need for Social Studies education arises when a society determines that formal education is required to develop a common set of understandings, skills, attitudes, and actions about human relationship among all members of the society. These common understandings can include the concept of unity in diversity in a multi- ethnic society, preserving cultural heritage and creating desirable social behaviors. It is in light of this, Kissock (1981) viewed Social Studies as a programme of study in which society uses to instill in learners the knowledge, skills attitudes and actions it considers concerning the relationships human beings have with each other, their world and themselves. The underlying assumption in this study is that the system of inter-ethnic and inter-religious group relationship currently prevailing in the Nigerian society is far from being satisfactory and there is a need to improve or completely change them.

This paper has several parts; the first will be a brief conceptual clarification of terms used in the paper. The second part will present a brief rationale for the introduction of Social Studies in other countries and the last part will discuss the needs and roles of effective teaching and learning of Social Studies education in Nigeria. At the end, a number of conclusions will be presented.

II. Conceptual Clarification Of Terms

Tolerance is traditionally understood to imply restraint when confronted with a group of practices found objectionable (Mendus 1988, 1989, 2000; Horton and Mendus 1991; Horton and Nicholison 1992; Heyd 1996; Cohen 2004). Religious tolerance is the willingness to refrain from preventing an individual or groups of people from expressing their views, opinions, choices on religious matters. It is the willingness of allowing one's religious views, beliefs, preferences and practices to undergo criticisms, for the advancement of

knowledge and understanding. It is based on the premise that people have fundamental rights to make choices on which religion they want to belong to, without any fear, force or coercion to manipulate such decisions. Religious tolerance is the ability to hold on to one's convictions, practices and beliefs, while recognizing and accepting the right of others to hold on to theirs. Religious tolerance is the ability to understand differing religious opinions and views other than one's own without any bias, prejudice or conflict. Religious tolerance is the ability to appreciate diversity and the ability to live and let others live. It is also the ability to exercise a fair and objective attitude towards those whose opinions, practices and beliefs differs from one's own. It is also the willingness to have one's own beliefs and related practices critically evaluated.

Unity in diversity means togetherness in various ways. It is a state of being in agreement and harmony with other people despite their differences.

Peaceful Coexistence is the ability to relate with others peacefully and respectfully, to understand and trust one another.

Religious Conflicts: refers to a situation of struggling within one or between two opposing principles, aims, and a clash of feeling or interest about social, political, economic, physical, religious, ethnic and educational issues. Conflicts are situations in which people, group or countries are involved in serious disagreements or argument. Religious conflict can be seen as any struggle or disagreement between religious groups (such as Christianity and Islam) about their beliefs, religious principles or activities that may translate into disagreement or hostilities, (Yar-Ali 2008). Going by this study, religious conflict will be considered as the conflict between two different religious groups, i.e. Christianity and Islam. This is a situation whereby a believer in a particular religion refuses to accept and accommodate ideas, doctrines and practices of another religion.

III. A Brief Rationale For The Introduction Of Social Studies In Other Countries

The position of the roles of Social Studies can be seen in the light of the experiences of other countries. Social studies as a tool and a vehicle for national development; it has been used as a partial solution for social problems in many countries of the world. According to Kissock (1981:1); in West Germany it was initiated after World War II as a means of developing a new political order. In Britain Social Studies is used to legitimize the teaching of the social sciences, particularly sociology. In Japan Social Studies is used to build a foundation for a democratic society. In Canada and in the United States of America, Social Studies continue its primary role of preparing students for effective citizenship in a democratic society. In Thailand it is used to foster individual and national development. In other African nations like Sierra Leone, Social Studies is being used to improve the self image of the people in the society after a colonial heritage. In Ghana Social Studies is used to learn ways of improving the economy after military rule. In Ethiopia, it is used to transform the political culture. In Nigeria, it is used to inculcate concepts of nationalism, unity, and interdependence among the citizenry.

IV. Roles Of Social Studies Education In Nigeria

As a developing country, Nigeria is faced with the arduous task of achieving a high dimension of nationalism, patriotism, national cohesion, religious tolerance among the different ethnic groups and religious groups that makes up the society so as to create a suitable environment for nation building and development. Okam (1989) is of the view that the ultimate objective of any program is the development and improvement of living generally, not merely in the classroom but also in the community, country and in the world as an entity. Engle (1977) reveals that the teaching of Social Studies in schools is expected to contribute to an acquisition and sustenance of desirable characteristics of an effective citizenry within a democratic society. Thus Banks and Clegg (1977) are convinced that a classroom dispensation of Social Studies may not only lay strong foundations for perpetuation of democratic principles and a just society but can bring about a fashioning out of youths, students, learners and citizens alike who are not only acutely aware of the characteristics of a democracy but could also pledge to become committed to its tenets and ideals.

Onwuka (1981), Ezema (2001) and Nwuzor (2002), underscores the roles of the school as a vital agent of socialization and provision of the curriculum for prompt moral cultivation and transformation. Ezema notes that with social studies education the student is able to "appreciate the diversity and interdependence of members of the different communities of the world over, to appreciate the need for cooperation, justice, fair play, tolerance, honesty and the need for patience, all of which are indispensable for the well-being, progress and general development of every human community.

Social Studies was conceived as a subject to help heal the wounds of civil war, ethnicity, and to promote national unity, cooperation, good citizenship etc. using the instrumentality of the school (Ezegbe 1988). According to the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (2003), social studies as a school subject was intended to enable the Nigerian child to develop the spirit of patriotism, tolerance and other types of productive qualities of citizenship. The goals of Social Studies education in Nigeria took root from the National Policy on Education (2004). The following are the goals of education contained in this document:

- i. the inculcation of national consciousness and national unity;
- ii. the inculcation of the right type of values and attitude for survival of the individual and the Nigerian society;
- iii. the training of the mind in the understanding of the world around; and
- iv. The acquisition of appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical, and social abilities and competencies as equipment for the individual to live and contribute to the development of the society.

Orakwue (2000) opined that one of the objectives of Social Studies is to inculcate in children the appreciation the diversity of Nigeria, positive attitude to citizenship, entrepreneurship, positive thinking, cooperation and honesty. In the same vein, Alaezi (1991) observed that the essence of Social Studies is to inculcate core societal values in children. The first two national goals of education contained in the national policy of education are the immediate concerns of Social Studies education. The quest for a free, just, fair and egalitarian society is the pursuit of Social Studies education in Nigeria.

Social Studies is aimed at uniting the vast and diverse ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria. It is aimed at promoting values of tolerance and peaceful coexistence which is needed to cement and exert efforts towards reducing crises between groups. There are centrifugal forces pulling the nation into another civil war or worse still disintegration, there is a growing need to teach young children cultural unity and religious tolerance for peaceful coexistence. One sure way of achieving this is through Social Studies education. A commitment to the objectives of Social Studies education would help create unity out of diversity. One of the beauties associated with the national policy of education (1981) is the place it gave to Social Studies to be taught as a compulsory subject aimed at building a cohesive society and training children to become patriotic citizens. Ismaila (1987) asserts that our colonial and post colonial experiences called for a restructuring of the educational system and some innovation in the school curriculum, in order to ensure a humane, egalitarian and democratic society supported by a buoyant economy and political stability. Through Social Studies education, the school which is a conglomeration of many cultures and religious groups can infuse into the young learners' patriotism and nationalism, thereby fostering unity in diversity, tolerance and peaceful coexistence which are so important in national development.

Social Studies education is aimed at training citizens to understand one another, tolerate one another despite their differences. Social Studies emerged in the schools' curricular with the aim of reforming education, for the purpose of sensitizing humanity so as to enjoy the resources available around them. It is a major tool for national development and is capable of presenting partial or total solutions to issues of crises and religious intolerance in Nigeria and many countries of the world. As Davis (2002), opined that "one important purpose of Social Studies is helping young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an independent world".

Okam (1998) elucidated the philosophy of Social Studies education as influencing many minds as to the assets the subject possesses in terms of confronting and attempting to solve the problems of man in his different environmental setting the world over. It has become an accepted fact in many quarters that Social Studies emerged in the schools' curricula with the aim of reforming education for the purpose of sensitizing humanity to the needs and resources of the world. Social Studies is a major tool for national development and is deemed as capable of presenting a partial or even total solutions to educational problems confronting many countries. Social Studies aims at examining the school curriculum for the purpose of meeting the ends reflected in the needs of the society. It is not only geared towards countering the problems of uncertainties which wedge nations away from each other but also poised to neutralize problems of uncertainties which militate against peace in continents of the world.

V. The Need For Social Studies Education In Nigeria

Nigeria is currently experiencing religious upheaval especially with the spate of killings and bombings unleashed on many innocent citizens by the dreaded Islamic religious sects commonly known as 'boko haram', it becomes imperative to use Social Studies as an existing school curriculum to re-awaken national unity and religious tolerance among Nigerians. Omare (1999) asserts that at various times, the need arises for countries to seek solutions to pressing problems of national importance, and this has been the position of various countries in search of political stability, unity and national consciousness is education. There is a growing need to embrace a type of education that will inculcate in the learners the values of peace and unity in diversity, the understanding of uniqueness, religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Learners should be taught to acquire knowledge about people, races and various ethnic groups in the country, knowing that these differences should not become a potential source of conflict but a tool for building unity and togetherness.

The need for Social Studies education arises when a society determines that formal instruction is required to develop a common set understandings, skills, attitudes, and actions about human relations among all members of the society. Social studies education is an essential tool in formal education used to build trust in the mist of suspicion and distrust, unity in diversity, tolerance in the face of growing intolerance as well as develop

desirable social understanding and behavior. Social Studies should be given a place in the society; avenues should be created for the optimum utilization of Social Studies to solve individual and collective problems. Social studies is needed anywhere change is required.

Mezeobi, Domike and Osakwe (1996) opined that among Nigerians, it is necessary to provide Nigerians the type of education that is characterized by Nigerians intercultural education. It is the position of this paper that Social Studies through its laudable goals and objectives can provide this intercultural education among others. In an era of increasing diversity and divisiveness, there is need to teach young people to respect and appreciate the identities of others. The future of this nation hinges on our success at getting along regardless of our ethnic and religious affiliations.

The need for mutual understanding, respect, and appreciation for the diverse cultures and ethnic groups that makes up the contiguous people of Nigeria, necessitated the introduction of social studies in the Nigerian educational system. The difficulty exists to develop harmonious living for the almost four hundred distinct ethnic groups of Nigeria; this is due to diversity of language customs, religion etc. Social studies provides a common orientation for all ethnic groups to work together as fellow compatriots, this is made possible through the school. Lebowitz (1981) observed that Social Studies is needed to make Nigerians understand that the people constituting the Nigerian population have much more in common than they differ. There is an increasing need to make children understand these differences through the teaching and learning of Social Studies education.

Ilori (1994:18) opined that Nigeria is a nation in need of “ethical revolution”. In support of this statement, Balyejusa (1981: 10-12), viewed Social Studies as a problem solving subject and as a “corrective study” to redress the educational ills of the colonial era as well as to address the present and future socio-intellectual needs of Nigeria and Nigerians. The above statements attest to the fact that Social Studies education is indispensable for the country. Okam (2002) is of the view that Social Studies in Nigeria is aimed at breaking the ethnic religious, linguistic and cultural barriers that keep apart the various groups that constitute the Nigerian society, so that nation-building can be facilitated by the concerted efforts of those divergent peoples of the Nigerian polity. Social Studies education is needed in order to develop and integrate the various ethnic groups, religious groups and cultural diverse groups in Nigeria to work together in unity, tolerating and understanding their differences. Social Studies education provides a common orientation to all compatriots in Nigeria enabling them to see themselves first as Nigerians and putting the interest of the nation first before any other.

The increasing popularity of the idea of globalization makes Social Studies education an imperative manual for Nigerians in their bid to interact with the outside world (Ayodele in Iyela & Audu, 2006). The need for Social Studies education in Nigeria is growing bigger by the day as societal and national problems tend to increase. The teaching of Social Studies enables learners to think beyond their individual interest and beyond their ethnic and religious affiliations; thereby making learners to become more tolerant and respectful of other people’s views and opinions. Obike (1993) is of the view that the peoples values orientation and their social attitude expressed through services rendered to one another constitute the bedrock upon which members of the society depend for their survival. This implies that any negative value can be changed through the teaching of Social Studies education.

VI. Curriculum Of Social Studies Education

Social Studies is society bound, this requires that its curriculum reflects the problems, yearning and aspiration of a given society. It is observed that, the nature of the problems and aspiration of the society has always determined the nature of Social Studies curriculum and of course, determines the purpose which the curriculum is out to serve. Probably, that is why Awoyemi (1994) opined that when we plan a Social Studies curriculum for any society, it must take the problem of that society into consideration. He stated further that, Nigeria for instance, has her problems which are not necessarily identical with the problems of other societies. It is essential therefore, that the Social Studies curriculum of Nigeria should take into consideration the peculiar problems of Nigeria among which is the problem of religious conflicts which has become an issue of national concern.

VII. Conclusion

The present analysis indicates that attitudes, beliefs, and emotions that maintain conflict and fuels intolerance, discrimination, and exploitation are all learned human behavior. It therefore implies that they can be unlearned and changed through the effective teaching and learning of Social Studies. Every human behavior learned can be modified through the use of the right type of education. In this paper, it has been emphasized that social studies education provides the right type of education that can promote unity, religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. It provides value education, ethical revolution, re-orientation for patriotism and nationalism and above all it serves as a catalyst for developing unity, religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Social Studies education is aimed at formation of values, motivations, beliefs, attitudes, emotions

and behavior patterns in learners that are suitable for nation building. The place of Social Studies education in our national development cannot be overemphasized. It awakens the spirit of nationalism, patriotism, political awareness, moral responsibility, values, and attitudes and blazes the trail in man power development of the nation. No nation can make any meaningful progress in an environment where there is religious intolerance and conflicts, therefore social studies should be effectively taught and learnt at all levels of the Nigerian educational system.

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