



Religious Education, Peacebuilding, and Democratic Citizenship in Nigeria: A Curriculum and Pedagogical Analysis

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Abstract

Nigeria's multi-religious and pluralistic society continues to experience persistent tensions and conflicts, highlighting the urgent need for educational strategies that promote democratic citizenship and sustainable peace. This study presents a conceptual and curriculum-based analysis of the role of Religious Education (RE) in advancing peacebuilding and democratic engagement in Nigeria. Drawing on existing literature and policy frameworks, the paper critiques the predominantly confessional and doctrinal orientation of current RE curricula, particularly Christian Religious Studies (CRS) and Islamic Religious Studies (IRS), which often marginalise interreligious literacy, critical civic competencies, and peace-oriented content. The analysis identifies key gaps in curriculum design, pedagogical practices, and systemic implementation, including inadequate teacher training, weak integration of peace education, and the challenges associated with merging religious and civic education into composite subjects such as "Religion and National Values." The paper argues for comprehensive curriculum reform that incorporates pluralistic perspectives, embeds peace education across disciplines, and strengthens the nexus between religious ethics, human rights, and democratic citizenship. It further emphasises the adoption of dialogic and participatory pedagogies, alongside strengthened school–community partnerships, to enhance contextual relevance and social cohesion. The study concludes that a reconceptualised and inclusive Religious Education framework can serve as a strategic tool for nurturing ethically grounded and socially responsible citizens capable of contributing to Nigeria's democratic consolidation and long-term peace.

Keywords: Religious Education; Peacebuilding; Democratic Citizenship; Curriculum Reform; Nigeria

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Introduction

Nigeria's socio-political landscape is characterised by deep pluralism across ethnic, cultural, and religious lines. This diversity enriches the nation but also contributes to persistent tensions and conflict. Historically, interreligious tensions, particularly between Muslim and Christian communities, have periodically escalated into violence, undermining social cohesion and national development (Akila & Blackmer, 2024). Such patterns reveal the urgent need for educational strategies that can cultivate democratic citizenship, mutual respect, and peacebuilding among citizens from early stages of schooling onward.

Education, particularly Religious Education (RE), occupies an important position in Nigeria's curriculum. Designed to impart ethical values, religious literacy, and moral

formation, RE has traditionally been viewed as a means for shaping individual character and fostering societal harmony (Kuponu & Akinsanya, 2025). However, the effectiveness of religious education in promoting democratic citizenship and peacebuilding remains contested. Critics contend that confessional or doctrinal teaching alone may fall short of equipping learners with the critical civic competencies required for democratic participation or interreligious cooperation (Kwayas, Stephen, Solomon, & Kasu, 2025).

The curriculum framework for Religious and Civic education in Nigeria has undergone reforms to respond to these concerns. The National Policy on Education recognises the role of education in promoting values that facilitate "living in unity and harmony as one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic, and sovereign nation" (Federal Republic of Nigeria, as cited in Ajibola & Musa, 2024). Despite this policy objective, empirical studies reveal gaps in curriculum design and implementation. For example, investigations into Christian Religious Studies (CRS) curricula in Colleges of Education indicate that while the curriculum has the potential to promote interreligious peace, its implementation is undermined by inadequate resources and a narrow focus that does not sufficiently engage pluralistic perspectives (Ajibola, Olowo, & Abunimye, 2022).

At the classroom level, pedagogical challenges further limit the peacebuilding and citizenship impact of RE. Traditional modes of instruction, often focused on memorisation and doctrinal conformity, are ill-suited to fostering the critical thinking, dialogue, and conflict resolution competencies essential for democratic citizenship in a plural society. Scholars have argued that transformative pedagogies, those that engage learners in reflective dialogue about civic values and diverse worldviews, are necessary to realise the democratic and peacebuilding potential of religious education (Selome & Akinsanya, 2025; Yahya et. al., 2025).

Moreover, the intersection of citizenship education and religious literacy is increasingly foregrounded in research on national unity in Nigeria. Citizenship education has been shown to promote tolerance, patriotism, and social cohesion among learners, indicating that integrated pedagogical approaches could strengthen both democratic engagement and peaceful intergroup relations (Ugobueze, 2024). Yet, the partition between civic and religious educational content in practice reflects a missed opportunity to harness synergies between these domains for peace and democratic readiness.

Research on peacebuilding further emphasises the constructive role that religion and religious education can play when curriculum and pedagogy are framed to support dialogue and social reconciliation rather than sectarian identity reinforcement. Religion, when appropriately mediated, can serve as a platform for conflict transformation and community healing, particularly in regions afflicted by prolonged violence (Haruna, Abraham, & Omede, 2025). In this light, examining how Religious Education curriculum and teaching practices align (or fail to align) with democratic and peacebuilding goals becomes imperative for educational policy and practice.

Furthermore, there is an emerging consensus in African educational scholarship advocating contextualised and decolonised approaches to religious education that affirm local identities, promote intercultural understanding, and support sustainable peacebuilding outcomes (Muasya, 2024; Yahya & Kewulere, 2024). Such perspectives

resonate strongly in Nigeria, where colonial legacies in education intersect with contemporary challenges of governance, identity politics, and civic participation.

Despite growing scholarly attention to religious education, democratic citizenship, and peacebuilding in Nigeria, a critical gap persists in the literature. Existing studies have largely examined these domains in isolation, with limited conceptual integration of curriculum analysis, pedagogical reform, and peacebuilding frameworks within the Nigerian RE context. Few studies have systematically interrogated how current RE curricula and pedagogical practices either inhibit or enable the development of interreligious literacy, democratic competencies, and peace-oriented values simultaneously. This paper seeks to address this gap by conducting a curriculum analysis of Religious Education in Nigeria, with the aim of identifying structural and pedagogical deficiencies and proposing a reconceptualised framework that aligns RE with the imperatives of democratic citizenship and sustainable peacebuilding. In doing so, the study contributes to emerging African educational scholarship on decolonised, contextualised, and peace-oriented approaches to religious education, offering both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for curriculum reform in pluralistic societies.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual research design, relying on documentary analysis of existing literature, policy documents, and scholarly works related to Religious Education, peacebuilding, and democratic citizenship in Nigeria. Relevant academic articles, books, and national education policy frameworks were purposively selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

The analysis is guided by a thematic approach, which involves identifying, analysing, and synthesising recurring patterns within the literature concerning curriculum design, pedagogical practices, and the integration of peace and civic values in Religious Education. This method enables a critical examination of existing gaps and the development of contextually relevant recommendations for curriculum and pedagogical reform.

Results and Discussion

Religious Education in Nigeria: Between Moral Formation and Confessional Orientation

Religious Education in Nigeria historically emerged through missionary and faith-based educational traditions that combined literacy formation with moral instruction (Kenneth Dike *Journal of African Studies*, 2025). In its contemporary form, however, Religious Education is still largely delivered through Christian Religious Studies (CRS) and Islamic Religious Studies (IRS) in ways that remain predominantly confessional and denominational. Rather than cultivating broad religious literacy and critical engagement with diversity, the curriculum often privileges doctrinal content and sectarian formation (Udemba, 2025; Ajibola et al., 2025). This tendency is particularly problematic in a plural society such as Nigeria, where education is expected to strengthen mutual

understanding, tolerance, and social cohesion. Studies examining Religious Education in Nigerian Colleges of Education further indicate that interreligious dialogue, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence are not sufficiently embedded in existing curricular frameworks (Ajibola, Olowo, & Abunimye, 2025; Zaria Journal of Educational Studies, 2025). As a result, Religious Education continues to shape moral identity, but it does not yet fully perform its potential role as an instrument for democratic citizenship and peacebuilding. This confirms the broader argument that Religious Education in African contexts should move beyond sectarian boundaries and contribute to ethical reflection, respect for human dignity, and social harmony across traditions (Onebunne, 2024; Akinsanya & Okpokpo, 2020).

Democratic Citizenship as a Necessary Educational Outcome

The reviewed literature also shows that democratic citizenship in Nigeria cannot be reduced to formal political participation alone. It includes the development of critical thinking, civic responsibility, respect for diversity, commitment to justice, and active involvement in public life (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In a society deeply shaped by ethnic, cultural, and religious plurality, these competencies are essential for democratic consolidation. Scholars have therefore argued that citizenship education in Nigeria must cultivate an inclusive, reflective, and dialogic orientation that helps learners negotiate competing identities while remaining committed to common democratic values (Obadare, 2018; Orobator, 2025). Yet the current curriculum environment suggests that civic formation has often been underdeveloped or diluted, especially where civic and religious content are merged without sufficient pedagogical clarity (Akinsanya & Okpokpo, 2020). This weakness has wider implications for democratic practice, as low civic literacy and fragile social trust continue to affect democratic participation and the culture of accountability in Nigerian schools and society (Olu-Adeyemi, Olushola, & Boboye, 2025). The implication here is that Religious Education can no longer remain detached from questions of citizenship, because moral education without civic relevance is unlikely to respond adequately to Nigeria's democratic realities.

Peacebuilding in the Context of Nigeria's Social Fragility

The findings further indicate that peacebuilding must be understood as a central educational concern in Nigeria rather than a peripheral moral aspiration. Educational peacebuilding involves developing the knowledge, dispositions, and practical skills required to prevent, manage, and transform conflict, while also addressing exclusion, mistrust, and social fragmentation (Gawerc, 2006). In Nigeria, where recurrent ethno-religious violence and communal clashes continue to threaten stability, this dimension of education is especially important (Saidu, 2019; Haruna, Buzaije, & Omede, 2025). However, current forms of Religious Education often fail to address the root causes of division or cultivate habits of empathy and dialogue among learners. Studies from conflict-prone contexts show that religious curricula rarely equip students to engage constructively with those from different traditions, thereby weakening their potential contribution to peacebuilding (Blackmer & Akila, 2025). African perspectives on peace education strengthen this point by emphasising contextual values such as ubuntu,

mutual responsibility, tolerance, and communal healing as necessary foundations for sustainable peace (Onebunne, 2024). From this perspective, the article suggests that Religious Education in Nigeria must be reoriented so that it can contribute meaningfully to conflict transformation and social reconciliation.

Curriculum Gaps Limiting the Transformative Role of Religious Education

One of the clearest results emerging from the thematic analysis is that the curriculum itself remains a major obstacle to the peacebuilding and citizenship potential of Religious Education. CRS and IRS curricula still concentrate heavily on scriptural knowledge, theological doctrines, and denominational practices, while giving inadequate attention to pluralism, civic obligations, human rights, and peace-oriented competencies (Ajibola et al., 2025; Udemba, 2025). This curricular confinement produces learners who may be knowledgeable in religion but insufficiently prepared to navigate the realities of a diverse democratic society. The literature consistently shows that such confessional narrowness may reinforce social silos, deepen interreligious suspicion, and reduce opportunities for cultivating shared civic values such as tolerance, mutual respect, and social responsibility (Onebunne, 2024; Okeke, 2024). The situation is compounded by limited instructional resources, outdated materials, and weak teacher preparation, which further restrict the implementation of inclusive and peace-sensitive curriculum reform (Haruna, Buzaije, & Omede, 2025). Thus, the challenge is not merely that Religious Education exists in a plural society, but that its current curricular design is not yet aligned with the civic and peacebuilding demands of that society.

Weak Peace-Centric Structures and the Problem of Merged Disciplinary Identities

Another major issue identified in the article is the absence of sufficiently strong peace-centric structures in Nigeria's education system. Peace education is rarely presented as a coherent, systematic component of the curriculum; where it appears, it is often fragmented, marginal, or treated as supplementary rather than foundational (Saidu, 2019; Okeke, 2024). This is deeply problematic in a society facing recurrent violence, because learners are not being consistently equipped with conflict mediation, negotiation, reconciliation, and nonviolent problem-solving skills (Ani, 2025). At the same time, the policy tendency to merge religious and civic education into composite subjects such as *Religion and National Values* has produced further ambiguity. While intended to improve curricular efficiency, this merger has often weakened both theological depth and civic clarity, making it difficult for teachers and students to navigate the dual aims of religious formation and democratic competence (Kwayas, Stephen, Solomon, & Kasu, 2025). Scholars argue that this creates pedagogical confusion, particularly when teachers are not adequately prepared to mediate the relationship between faith-based ethics and secular democratic norms (Akinsanya & Okpokpo, 2020; Udemba, 2025; Obadare, 2018). The broader effect is that Religious Education risks becoming neither sufficiently transformative as moral formation nor sufficiently effective as citizenship education. This supports the argument that curriculum integration must be more deliberate, conceptually coherent, and pedagogically scaffolded if it is to contribute to peacebuilding and democratic citizenship in a meaningful way (Blackmer & Akila, 2025; Onebunne, 2024).

Directions for Curriculum Reform: Inclusion, Peace, and Civic Relevance

The discussion in the article points clearly toward the need for curriculum reform that is pluralistic, inclusive, and socially relevant. Rather than maintaining narrowly confessional content, Religious Education should include comparative religious literacy, interfaith dialogue, shared ethical inquiry, and explicit engagement with justice, compassion, tolerance, and social responsibility across traditions (Ajibola, Olowo, & Abunimye, 2022). This would allow diversity to be taught not as a threat but as a normal and constructive dimension of public life. Such curricular reorientation is consistent with wider global and local arguments that pluralist religious education can strengthen freedom, human rights, and democratic coexistence in diverse societies (Parliament of the World's Religions, 2023; Kuponu & Akinsanya, 2025). The article also emphasises that peace education should be integrated across the curriculum rather than isolated as an optional component. In the Nigerian context, this requires structured attention to empathy, conflict analysis, mediation, reconciliation, and restorative justice, beginning from early schooling and extending into tertiary education (Fabarebo, Sangotunde, & Ojetayo, 2019; Obeka & Nwigwe, 2024). In addition, ethical teachings in Religious Education should be explicitly connected to human rights and civic participation so that students can relate religious morality to democratic norms such as equality, accountability, freedom of conscience, and public responsibility (Jatau & Maza, 2023). This is in line with recent curriculum reform directions in Nigeria that have renewed attention to citizenship studies and civic competence (NERDC curriculum reforms, 2025).

Pedagogical Transformation, Teacher Development, and School-Community Partnerships

Curriculum reform alone, however, is insufficient without corresponding pedagogical change. The article strongly suggests that traditional modes of instruction based on memorisation, passive reception, and doctrinal conformity are incapable of fostering the critical thinking, empathy, and conflict resolution skills required for democratic citizenship and peacebuilding. Instead, Religious Education should adopt dialogic and participatory pedagogies that allow students to discuss ethical dilemmas, encounter different perspectives, and practise civic interaction in meaningful ways (Asue & Kajo, 2024). Participatory learning, including role play, collaborative projects, interfaith engagement, and community-based learning, has been shown to strengthen empathy, civic competence, and peaceful coexistence among learners (Ojedokun & Nnamdi, 2023). The article also identifies teacher capacity as a key implementation issue. Many teachers lack specialised preparation in interfaith literacy, peace education, democratic pedagogy, and conflict-sensitive teaching, which limits their ability to facilitate transformative learning (Advance Journal of Education and Social Sciences, 2024; Okeke & Asuquo, 2025). This makes ongoing professional development essential, especially in areas such as human rights, ethics, participatory methods, and reflective teaching practice (Saidu, 2019). Beyond the classroom, the article highlights the

importance of school–community partnerships. Collaboration with local communities, religious leaders, civic organisations, and youth groups can help situate learning within real social contexts and strengthen the practical application of peacebuilding values (Ani, 2025). Evidence from school-based interfaith initiatives in Northern Nigeria suggests that such partnerships can reduce tension, promote mutual understanding, and support collaborative problem-solving among young people from different religious backgrounds (Blackmer & Akila, 2025). In this sense, the transformation of Religious Education requires not only curricular and pedagogical reform, but also a broader social ecology of educational support grounded in communal responsibility (Onebunne, 2024).

Expected Outcomes of a Reformed Religious Education Framework

The overall discussion suggests that a reformed Religious Education framework has the potential to generate important outcomes for Nigerian society. First, students are more likely to develop interreligious tolerance and the ability to engage respectfully across lines of faith difference. Second, they are better positioned to become active and informed citizens with stronger understanding of democratic principles, civic duties, and ethical responsibility. Third, they can acquire practical peacebuilding competencies such as mediation, negotiation, and restorative engagement, which are essential in a conflict-prone context. Finally, the integration of moral, ethical, and civic learning into everyday educational practice may contribute to wider social transformation and more sustainable national cohesion (Saidu, 2019; Ojedokun & Nnamdi, 2023). These outcomes are presented in the article not as direct empirical findings from field data, but as the logical implications of the thematic analysis of existing scholarship. Even so, they provide a strong conceptual basis for arguing that Religious Education, if reconceptualised appropriately, can serve as a strategic instrument for democratic consolidation and long-term peace in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Nigeria's pursuit of democratic consolidation and sustainable peace is deeply intertwined with the transformative capacity of its education system. When reconceptualized as inclusive, democratic, and peace-oriented, religious education has the potential to serve as a catalyst for national unity rather than a source of division. Realizing this potential necessitates comprehensive systemic reforms, including the redesign of curricula to integrate peace education and civic competencies, the adoption of innovative pedagogical approaches that prioritize dialogue, critical thinking, and participatory learning, and the enhancement of teacher capacity alongside active school-community partnerships that contextualize learning within local social realities. Such reforms would enable education to cultivate not only knowledgeable citizens but also ethically grounded, socially responsible individuals capable of advancing democratic ideals and sustaining peace across Nigeria. Consequently, the strategic alignment of religious education with democratic citizenship and peacebuilding emerges as a national imperative, offering the promise of a more cohesive, harmonious, and resilient society.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that this study is primarily conceptual and literature-based in its analytical approach. As such, its findings and

recommendations are necessarily limited by the scope of existing scholarship and do not draw on direct empirical data from Nigerian classrooms, schools, or educational institutions. The conceptual framework proposed here, while grounded in relevant theory and policy analysis, requires empirical validation to assess its practical applicability and effectiveness within diverse Nigerian educational contexts.

Future research should therefore prioritise empirical investigations into how peace-oriented religious education is implemented in Nigerian schools at both basic and secondary levels. Qualitative studies exploring teachers' experiences, classroom dynamics, and learners' responses to dialogic and participatory pedagogies would provide valuable insights into the practical challenges and opportunities of curriculum reform. Comparative studies across different geopolitical zones in Nigeria, as well as cross-national studies involving other pluralistic African societies, would further enrich understanding of contextualised approaches to religious education for peacebuilding and democratic citizenship.

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