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INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND UNDERSTANDING: A POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCE OF ARISING SINGLE FAITH SCHOOLS IN ILORIN METROPOLIS, KWARA STATE

BY

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Abstract

The rise of single faith schools in Ilorin Metropolis, Kwara State, Nigeria, may have unintended consequences in a very diverse country like Nigeria where religion matters remain very sensitive and can greatly impact interfaith understanding. This study examined the impact of single faith schools on pupils' interfaith understandings. The research investigates whether exposure to a single-faith school environment fosters interfaith understanding or reinforces religious boundaries. Descriptive, survey research design was used. 174 pupils were selected for this study from privately owned single faith and conventional schools using stratified sampling technique. Rating scale was used as the research instrument. One research question and two hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that pupils from single faith schools have a low level of interfaith religion understanding. Also, there was no significant difference in interfaith religion understanding of pupils' based on gender. The researcher therefore recommends that the unintended consequences of the rising numbers of single faith schools in the metropolis should be evaluated as Nigeria remains a country which is largely still sensitive to religious issues. Also, single faiths should make deliberate effort to teach and promote interfaith dialogue in their schools and the country needs all her citizens to understand and be tolerant to other religions.

Keywords: Primary Education; Interfaith, Religion Tolerance, Child Development.

Introduction

Nigeria is a country full of citizen with different religious beliefs with three major religions being practiced; Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. This religious diversity has caused some societal unrest as can be seen in different regions in the country. Similarly, the rise of single faith schools in some regions in Nigeria, may have unintended consequences because religion matters remain very sensitive and can greatly impact interfaith dialogue and understanding. Interfaith is relating to or involving different religions or members of different religions being together while dialogue means a discussion between people in which opinions are exchanged (Andrabi, 2020). Before the advent of technology, interfaith dialogue was still carried out conventionally by one-on-one meeting with the audiences which typically occurs in educational institutions such as campuses and schools, religious counselling institutes (Juhri & Hariani, 2023). Interfaith dialogue is commonly defined as a platform for mediating the differences and actions of different religious adherents when interacting and cooperating to build a shared understanding and mutual respect for religious beliefs (Awang, Faruk & Kasan, 2019). Interfaith dialogue, as mentioned by Benarrivo (2016), is capable of constructing the mindset of people with different religions and beliefs

so that they can stand on the same view and conception that differences exist and accept the plurality that exists. Furthermore, according to Greenebaum (2014), interfaith dialogue can take a wide variety of forms, ranging from joint appeals by high-level religious leaders, to attempts to develop mutual understanding and the recognition of shared values and interests, to grassroots efforts to encourage repentance and promote reconciliation. Interfaith dialogue, in the opinion of (Andrabi, 2020) is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences.

The road to interfaith dialogue has not always been a wide highway that everyone eagerly followed. Interreligious dialogue barriers could be recognised both inside and outside the religious structure (Samartha, 2015). Other religious traditions may go against the discussion because it is perceived as a form of indirect proselytism, hence the motivation for dialogue is questioned. The fear of the unknown, as well as prejudices against other religious traditions, are the most significant barriers to interfaith interaction today (Islam, 2023). Despite the barriers, the interfaith dialogue between all religions in the opinion of (Andrabi, 2020) will aid in the removal of prejudices and misperceptions about one another, assisting one another in achieving mutual goals such as, the establishment of universal peace and justice, promotion of moral principles and the protection of human rights. Islam (2023), posited that interfaith discussion can aid in the removal of fear from the minds of oppressed minorities, allowing them to collaborate with the majority grouping the development and prosperity of the nation. Tolerance for the open expression of many faiths is necessary in a plural society, especially in our schools, for any interfaith conversation to begin and continue successfully. In lieu to this, adherents of all religions will need to respect and tolerate one other's religious beliefs. Schools are nowadays one of the institutions where diversity, and particularly religious diversity, becomes visible and crystallizes. As a result, religious education appears to be a battlefield for different kinds of struggles (Martínez-Ariño & Teinturier, 2019). Research on the intersection of religion and education has focused predominantly on public secular schools, and in particular on their education programs to teach religion or about religion, their institutional responses to increasing diversity among pupils, and legal, social, and political debates about religion and education (Sulyman & Lawal, 2023; Sulyman & Ajiboye 2023).

Despite this gap, there have been numerous contributions to a better understanding of the responses of schools to a changing cultural and religious environment. Outside Nigeria, in Canada, for instance, Graham, Coholic and Groen (2012) revealed how faith-based schools are a usual subject of controversy, with numerous debates about public funding (in some provinces) and about their ability to inform Canadian citizenship in the context of a multicultural society. It was concluded in the study that faith-based schools are adequate to educate students as tolerant and respectful citizens. Similarly, Tremblay (2014), based on her research on a Muslim, a Jewish, and a Steiner school in the Greater Montreal metropolitan area, has analyzed how private faith-based schools elaborate a kind of plural citizenship and enlarge students' religious perspectives. Specifically, Ferrara (2017), has studied Muslim schools in France: Based on an anthropological research conducted in three private Muslim schools, her results show that Republican values and Islamic values are taught together, allowing for the emergence of a French Muslim-civic engagement. Merry (2015), proposed an interesting argument regarding European religious schools and their popularity. According to him, schools belonging to the main Christian denominations (i.e. Catholic or Protestant) may present a pattern of institutional exclusion, as parents would choose them first for the elite education they offer. On the contrary, schools for religious minorities would be a response to issues of vulnerable minorities. In the Netherlands, Versteegt and Maussen (2011), showed that Islamic and orthodox Christian communities and schools attract negative attention of Dutch society; there is a gap between this attention and what happens in schools. Being constantly under scrutiny makes school principals, parents and students aware of, and willing to engage in, the negotiations between their religious values and the desired integration in the larger society. Conservative religious schools, more deeply attached to religious values, may face a stronger challenge to fuze with larger societal values (Mausen, 2014; Sulyman et al 2024; Sulyman, 2017). However, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, studies related to interfaith dialogue and faith-based schools has received less attention in Nigeria, specifically in the Northern region where religious crisis are rampant. It is against this background that this study wants to examine the impact of single faith schools on pupils' interfaith dialogue and understanding. Ilorin Metropolis, Kwara State.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria is a diverse nation where everyone has the civic and social right to worship anything he/she believes. This is line with Section 38(1) of the 1999 Nigeria Constitution which clearly stated that every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief. Despite this right, different scholars, media houses and eye-witnesses have revealed that there have been social and conflict between different religions in Nigeria. Researches have suggested ways by which this pertinent issue can be solved in our society. Majority of those findings have concluded that interfaith dialogue is one way of addressing the problem. Since then studies have been carried out on the concept. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, only few studies on interfaith dialogue with focus on single faith schools have been carried out in Nigeria, specifically in Ilorin Metropolis of Kwara. This study hence is filling the gap.

Research Question

1. What is the level of understanding of interfaith dialogue among pupils in single-faith schools?

Research Hypotheses

- H₀₁:** There is no significant difference between pupils' interfaith dialogue understanding based on gender.
H₀₂: There is no significant difference between pupils' interfaith dialogue understanding based on school ownership.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to investigate whether exposure to a single-faith school environment fosters interfaith understanding or reinforces religious boundaries. A stratified sampling technique was used to select 174 pupils from privately owned single-faith and conventional schools. A self-developed rating scale was used as the research instrument to collect data from the respondents. Data collected were analysed using both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) was used to answer research question while inferential statistics (Independent Sample t-test was use for the hypotheses). The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question

1. What is the level of understanding of interfaith dialogue among pupils in single-faith schools?

Table 1: Mean and Standard deviation showing the level of interfaith dialogue understanding of pupils' in single faith schools.

S/N	Teachers Training	Mean	SD	Remark
1	I have friends who belong to different religious faiths	1.35	.508	Low
2	I respect the religious beliefs and practices of others, even if they are different from mine	1.61	.580	Low
3	I am open to learning about religions other than my own.	1.61	.710	Low

4	My school encourages discussions about different religions	1.44	.644	Low
5	I believe it is important to understand the religious beliefs of others	1.65	.665	Low
6	I feel comfortable sharing my religious beliefs with others.	1.78	.736	Low
7	interfaith activities and events are beneficial for promoting understanding	1.56	.732	Low
8	I have participated in activities that involve people from different religious backgrounds.	1.66	.701	Low
9	My religious education helps me understand and respect other religions	1.56	.712	Low
10	I think people of different religions can live together peacefully in the same community.	1.35	.508	Low
Weighted Mean		1.59		

Decision rule: 0.00-2.00 (Low), 2.00-above (High)

Table 1 shows the level of understanding of interfaith dialogue among pupils in single-faith schools. The findings revealed the level of understanding of interfaith dialogue among pupils in single-faith schools. The weighted mean is 1.59 between 1.5 and 2.4 (Low) and a numeric indicator that the level of interfaith dialogue understanding of pupils in single faith schools in Ilorin Metropolis, Kwara State is Low.

Testing Hypothesis

H₀₁: There is no significant difference between pupils' understanding of interfaith dialogue based on gender.

Table 2: Summary of t-test Analysis showing the difference between pupils' understanding of interfaith dialogue based on gender.

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Df	Sig.	Remark
Male	95	31.75	5.756	-.409	172	.654	Not Significant
Female	79	32.01	5.713				

P>0.05

Table 2 data shows the difference between pupils' understanding of interfaith dialogue based on gender. The finding revealed that there was no significant difference between pupils' understanding of interfaith dialogue based on gender. (t = -.409; df = 172; P > 0.05). The hypothesis was therefore not rejected in light of the result since the significant value (.654) is more than 0.05. This implies that male pupils' understanding of interfaith dialogue (Mean= 31.75) is not significantly different from female pupils' understanding of interfaith dialogue. (Mean= 32.01).

H₀₂: There is no significant difference between pupils' understanding of interfaith dialogue based on school ownership.

Table 3: Summary of t-test Analysis on the significant difference between pupils' understanding of interfaith dialogue based on school ownership.

School Ownership	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Df	Sig.	Remark
Single-Faith	8	36.91	2.348	-3.182	172	.004	Significant
Conventional Schools	22	39.63	.744				

Table 3 data shows the significant differences between pupils' understanding of interfaith dialogue based on school ownership. The finding revealed that there was significant difference between pupils' understanding of interfaith dialogue based on school ownership ($t = -3.182$; $df = 28$; $P < 0.05$). The hypothesis was therefore rejected in light of the result since the significant value is less than 0.05. This implies that pupils' understanding of interfaith dialogue in conventional schools (Mean= 39.63) is significantly higher than that of privately-owned single faith schools. (Mean= 36.91).

Discussion of the Findings

The finding of this study among others revealed that the level of interfaith dialogue understanding of pupils in single faith schools in Ilorin Metropolis, Kwara State is Low. This is against the findings of Nor et. al., (2016) whose study examined the understanding of the basic concept of inter-faith dialogue and its impact on social relations. Their study revealed that there was a high level of understanding of the basic concept of the inter-faith dialogue among Muslim and non-Muslim students. The reason for the high level according to them is due to the method or medium of getting information on Inter-faith dialogue. Similarly, it is against the findings of Khan, Bashir and Jafar (2024) whose study revealed that there was a gradual positive increase in the level of students' understanding of interfaith dialogue and tolerance after every activity. Also, findings in this study revealed that there was no significant difference between pupils' understanding of interfaith dialogue based on gender. The finding is in accordance with Yurtseven and Altun (2015) who found no significant difference in the level of interfaith sensitivity according to sex. Similarly, the findings of Haugen (2017) also found no clear differences in interfaith sensitivity between women and men.

Conclusion and Recommendations.

This study examined the impact of single faith schools on pupils' interfaith understandings. Findings revealed that pupils from single faith schools have a low level of interfaith religion understanding. Also, there was no significant difference in interfaith religion understanding of pupils based on gender. The researcher therefore recommends that:

1. The unintended consequences of the rising numbers of single faith schools in the metropolis should be evaluated as Nigeria remains a country which is largely still sensitive to religious issues.
2. Single faiths should make deliberate efforts to teach and promote interfaith dialogue in their schools and t
3. The country needs to sensitize all her citizens to understand and be tolerant to other religions.

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