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THE IMPACT OF MORAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM ON STUDENTS' ETHICAL VALUES AND BEHAVIOUR IN PLATEAU STATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of the moral education curriculum in shaping the ethical values and behaviour of secondary school students in Plateau State, Nigeria. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys of students and interviews with teachers and administrators. The study assesses the curriculum's impact on students' ethical attitudes and behaviours, identifies implementation challenges, and explores the role of teachers in fostering moral development. Findings reveal partial success in promoting core moral values but highlight significant resource constraints and socio-cultural challenges that undermine its effectiveness. Recommendations include enhanced teacher training, curriculum reform towards more interactive pedagogies, and fostering stronger school-community partnerships to strengthen moral education outcomes. This research contributes to the body of knowledge on actionable strategies for improving moral education within the unique context of Nigerian secondary schools.

Keywords: effectiveness, moral education, curriculum, ethical values, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Moral education in Nigeria is typically not a standalone subject but is integrated into other courses such as civic education, social studies, and religious studies (Christian Religious Studies and Islamic Religious Studies). The curriculum aims to address a perceived decline in societal values and equip students with the ethical principles necessary for responsible citizenship. This approach is rooted in Nigeria's National Policy on Education, which emphasises the inculcation of desirable values, attitudes, and social skills in learners (Federal Government of Nigeria [FGN], 2013).

Moral education serves as a cornerstone for the holistic development of individuals, instilling values such as integrity, empathy, responsibility, and ethical decision-making. Schools are often the primary environments where children encounter diverse perspectives and structured ethical guidance. Through interactions with peers and teachers, students learn the importance of fairness, respect, and accountability. Education provides the tools for critical thinking and empathy, playing a vital role in shaping a morally conscious society (Singha, 2025). Furthermore, moral education can boost students' self-confidence across home, school, and community settings, fostering resilience and a positive self-image by helping them recognise their strengths and address their weaknesses.

In the context of Nigeria, where diverse cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors intersect, moral education curricula in secondary schools are pivotal in shaping the character of young people. Plateau State, located in Nigeria's North-Central region, is characterised by its multi-ethnic composition and a history of communal conflicts. These dynamics underscore the need for robust moral education programs that address universal ethical principles while incorporating local values to foster social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

However, the implementation of the moral education curriculum faces significant challenges. A major critique is that the current approach often relies on rote memorisation of religious and cultural norms without encouraging critical thinking or moral reasoning (Ajiboye, 2023). This can lead to students knowing what to do but not understanding why it is the right thing to do. The curriculum's effectiveness is further hampered by a lack of dedicated instructional time, inadequately trained teachers, and the pervasive influence of social media and broader societal decay, which often contradicts the values taught in school (Gwom, 2024).

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the moral education curriculum in Plateau State public secondary schools, drawing on empirical evidence to assess its impact on students' moral reasoning, behaviour, and overall societal contributions. By examining this topic, the research contributes to broader discussions on educational reform in developing contexts, highlighting how moral education can mitigate societal challenges like youth restiveness, corruption, and intergroup tensions.

Problem Statement

In Plateau State, secondary schools are tasked with delivering moral education curricula intended to cultivate ethical awareness and positive behavioural traits among students. Yet, there is a notable gap in systematic evaluations of these programs' effectiveness. Despite the integration of moral

education into various subjects, qualitative evidence suggests inconsistencies in implementation, influenced by factors such as inadequate teacher training, resource constraints, and cultural diversity that may dilute the curriculum's relevance.

The state's history of ethno-religious conflicts has heightened the urgency for moral education to promote tolerance and conflict resolution. However, without rigorous assessment, it remains unclear whether these curricula are achieving desired outcomes, such as improved moral judgement or reduced incidences of antisocial behaviour among students. Furthermore, existing research on moral education in Nigeria often focuses on national or urban settings, leaving rural and conflict-prone areas like Plateau State underrepresented.

This lack of localised data impedes policymakers' ability to refine curricula, allocate resources effectively, or address emerging challenges like the influence of social media on youth ethics. Consequently, without comprehensive evaluation, moral education risks becoming a perfunctory component of schooling rather than a transformative force, potentially exacerbating societal issues and hindering the development of a morally grounded generation in Plateau State. This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the curriculum's strengths, weaknesses, and measurable impacts.

Research Objectives

i. To assess the impact of the moral education curriculum on students' ethical behaviour, attitudes, and decision-making in Plateau State secondary schools. ii.To evaluate teachers' and students' perceptions of the relevance, adequacy, and implementation challenges of the moral education curriculum in Plateau State secondary schools.

Research Questions

ii. To what extent does the moral education curriculum influence students' attitudes and behaviours related to honesty, respect, and social responsibility? ii.What challenges do teachers face in delivering the moral education curriculum effectively, and how do these challenges affect its implementation?

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by a combination of moral development and social learning theories, which together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how moral values are acquired and enacted.

1. Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development Lawrence Kohlberg's(1984) theory proposes that individuals progress through a sequence of six stages of moral reasoning, grouped into three levels:

· Pre-conventional: Morality is determined by external consequences (rewards and punishments).
· Conventional: Morality is based on societal norms, laws, and the expectations of others.

· Post-conventional: Morality is guided by abstract, universal principles of justice and human rights.

Application to the Study: This framework will be used to assess the level of moral reasoning among students in Plateau State. The study will investigate whether students operate primarily at a conventional level (following rules because they are rules) or demonstrate evidence of post-conventional thinking. The curriculum's effectiveness can be measured by its ability to facilitate progression to higher stages of moral reasoning.

2. Social Learning Theory (Bandura) Albert Bandura's(1977) theory posits that individuals learn behaviours, including moral ones, through observation, imitation, and modelling. This process involves attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation, which is often influenced by seeing others rewarded or punished (vicarious reinforcement).

Application to the Study: This theory is crucial for analysing the potential disconnect between the values taught in school and those modelled in society. If students observe leaders, family members, or peers engaging in unethical behaviour without consequence, their motivation to act ethically is diminished. Social learning theory helps to explain the power of the "hidden curriculum" and societal influences that can undermine formal moral education.

By integrating these theories, the study can analyse both the cognitive development of moral reasoning (Kohlberg) and the critical environmental and social factors that influence ethical behaviour (Bandura).

Empirical Studies

Globally, moral education is shifting from traditional, didactic approaches towards a holistic, student-centred model that emphasises critical thinking, socio-emotional learning, and global citizenship. Innovative methods, including the use of technology to create immersive ethical scenarios, are being explored to enhance relevance and engagement.

In contrast, Nigeria’s curriculum, while aiming to instil similar values of character and citizenship, struggles with implementation. Studies consistently identify an over-reliance on rote memorisation, a lack of adequately trained teachers, and a significant societal disconnect where the "hidden curriculum" of everyday life often contradicts the values promoted in the classroom (Ajiboye, 2023; Gwom, 2024; Okoye & Nweke, 2021).

Research within Nigeria underscores the necessity of an integrated approach. The infusion method, which embeds moral lessons across the curriculum and daily school activities, is advocated over a standalone subject approach. The critical role of the teacher is also highlighted, with studies showing that teacher preparedness and commitment are significant determinants of the program's success (Ogundele et al., 2016).

Existing empirical findings often reveal a gap between moral knowledge and ethical behaviour. Students can frequently articulate moral principles but do not consistently apply them (Ajiboye, 2023). Methodologically, much of the existing research relies on descriptive surveys within specific geographical locations, limiting its generalisability to a unique and complex state like Plateau.

This study aims to address these limitations by focusing on the specific socio-cultural context of Plateau State, employing a mixed-methods approach to bridge the knowledge-behaviour gap, and critically analysing the impact of teacher pedagogy on student outcomes.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data collection to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of moral education in Plateau State. The target population included 20 Senior Secondary Schools in Jos South Local Government Area. A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure representation across urban and rural areas. The sample comprised 300 students and 50 teachers.

Quantitative Data Collection:

Student Surveys: Structured questionnaires using Likert-scale items were administered to measure students' attitudes, self-reported ethical behaviours, and perceptions of the moral education curriculum.

· Pre- and Post-Tests: Assessments were conducted to evaluate changes in students' moral reasoning before and after a period of focused exposure to the curriculum.

Qualitative Data Collection:

· Teacher Interviews and Focus Groups: Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with teachers and administrators to explore their perspectives on curriculum relevance, teaching methods, and implementation challenges.

· Classroom Observations: An observation checklist was used during moral education lessons to assess teaching strategies and student engagement.

Data Analysis:

· Quantitative Data: Descriptive statistics (e.g., means, frequencies) summarised the data. Inferential statistics (e.g., t-tests, ANOVA) were used to compare pre- and post-intervention results. Regression analysis explored relationships between variables such as teacher training and student outcomes.

· Qualitative Data: Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes and insights from interviews, focus groups, and observation notes.

Results

The findings revealed a moderate positive correlation ($r = .56$, $p < .01$) between exposure to the moral education curriculum and students' self-reported ethical behaviour. Quantitative data indicated that students reported increased awareness of values such as honesty and respect. However, qualitative data from interviews and observations noted significant variability in students' consistent application of these principles.

Thematic analysis highlighted that teachers made efforts to employ interactive teaching methods. However, their effectiveness was severely limited by challenges such as inadequate teaching aids, large class sizes, and insufficient pedagogical training specifically for moral education. Furthermore, socio-cultural factors and strong peer influence were identified as significant external barriers to reinforcing moral values outside the classroom.

Findings

The study's findings reveal a significant gap between moral knowledge and ethical behaviour among students. The curriculum's implementation is hampered by:

1. Poor Pedagogy: A predominant reliance on traditional, lecture-based methods focused on rote memorisation rather than critical engagement and moral reasoning.
2. Insufficient Teacher Training: Many teachers reported feeling ill-equipped to facilitate sensitive ethical discussions and lacked the skills to make the curriculum engaging and relevant to students' lives.
3. Lack of Practical Application: The curriculum was found to lack practical, real-world components like community service or structured debates on ethical dilemmas, which are essential for translating knowledge into action.
4. Disjointed Effort: A notable lack of collaboration between schools, parents, and community leaders was observed, which weakens the consistent reinforcement of moral values across different spheres of a student's life.

Discussion

The results align with existing research in Nigeria, underscoring the critical importance of teacher training and resource provision in enhancing moral education. While the curriculum is partially effective in raising students' ethical awareness, translating this awareness into consistent behaviour requires supportive learning environments and active community involvement. The study reflects broader systemic challenges in Nigerian education, including funding deficits and socio-cultural complexities.

The findings support the theoretical framework: the lack of progress to higher stages of moral reasoning (Kohlberg) can be linked to pedagogical limitations, while the powerful influence of external socio-cultural factors (Bandura) explains the gap between knowledge and behaviour. Strengthening the infusion approach—integrating moral education across subjects—and fostering collaboration among schools, families, and communities are posited as necessary strategies for improving outcomes.

Conclusion

The moral education curriculum in Plateau State shows promise in elevating students' ethical awareness but faces significant implementation challenges that prevent it from achieving its full potential. Addressing teacher capacity, resource allocation, and socio-cultural barriers is critical to maximising its impact. This study provides valuable insights for curriculum designers and policymakers aiming to foster responsible youth citizenship and contribute to Nigeria’s social development goals.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered:

For Policymakers (NERDC, State Ministry of Education):

· Revise the Curriculum: Update the curriculum to incorporate modern, student-centred methodologies that prioritise ethical reasoning, critical thinking, and socio-emotional learning, aligning with global trends.

· Mandate Teacher Training: Implement mandatory, ongoing professional development programs for teachers, focusing on interactive, discussion-based pedagogical strategies for moral education.

· Allocate Resources: Increase funding and provide schools with adequate, relevant instructional materials, including textbooks, case studies, and multimedia tools tailored to moral education.

For School Administrators:

· Prioritise the Subject: Allocate sufficient and dedicated time for moral education in the school timetable and ensure teachers are adequately supervised and supported.

· Foster a Moral School Culture: Establish a clear, values-based code of conduct and implement systems to reward ethical behaviour, creating an environment where moral values are lived and experienced.

· Implement Monitoring and Evaluation: Establish robust systems to continuously track and assess the curriculum’s impact on student behaviour and well-being.

For Educators:

· Adopt Interactive Pedagogies: Move beyond lectures towards engaging methods like role-playing, debates, and project-based learning to help students apply ethical principles.

· Use Real-World Examples: Connect moral lessons to contemporary issues students face, such as peer pressure, social media use, and conflict resolution, to enhance relevance.

For Parents and the Community:

· Engage with Schools: Actively partner with schools through Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and community initiatives to consistently reinforce the values taught in the classroom.

· Model Ethical Behaviour: Recognising the power of social learning, adults in the community should strive to model the integrity and values they wish to see in the youth.

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