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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial Board	ii
Editorial Comments	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Assessing Confidence Level of Pre-Service Primary Education Teachers in Teaching Mathematics and Science for Sustainable Development in Ilorin Metropolis T. A. AHMED and M. O. OGUNJIMI	370
Availability and Implementation of One Year Pre-Primary School Curriculum In Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria A.O. OLANIYAN and I. A. SALAMI	381
Influence of Early-Schooling and Parental Educational Background on Pupils' Aptitude in Primary School Mathematics in Ogbomoso, Oyo State N. OLANIRAN and M. G. IKUENOMORE	393
Lecturers' Perception of Quality in the Pre-Service Training of Early Childhood Education Teachers: Implication for the Achievement of SDGS In Nigeria Victoria I. IROEGBU and Bukola O. SAMUEL	406
Early Childhood Education Pre-Service Teachers' Perception of Participatory Learning Method: Implications for the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria P. K. OLOWE and Esther A. ODUOLOWU	420
Early Childhood Development as a Tool for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals Regina V. AKUME ¹ and Abigail A. OGODA	439

Early Childhood Education and Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals In Nigeria Chidinma. J. OKOSUN ¹ and Rita ONYEIZU	449
Effects of Graphic Organisers Strategy on Pupils' Learning Outcomes in Social Studies in Elementary Schools in Ife, Osun State J. O. OKEWOLE and Olufunke A. OSINOWO	463
Inclusive Education in Early Childhood Education Settings in Nigeria: Policy and Practice W. I. ACHAGH, E. C. OKENYI, M. MUSA and Comfort B. EKELE	477
Knowledge and Relevance of Creativity in Pre-School Children among Caregivers in Lagos State M. A. LAMIDI, A. T. ESOIMEME, S. A OGUNMADE and Ilamina R. JACKRICH	493
Parental Financial Status, Literacy Levels and Pupils' Achievement in Early Schooling in Niger State, Nigeria R. C. OKOLIE and Mfon-Ette T. ADALIKWU	505
Teachers' Improvisation Skills in Science Classroom: A Pathway for Sustainable Development Goals in Ondo West Local Government Area of Ondo State Monisola O. OLOTU and I.A. SALAMI	517
Role of Libraries in Providing Information Services for Early Childhood Care and Education: Pathways for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals in an ICT Age Omobolanle O. AINA, A. J. AINA and B. G. ABIDOGUN	527

Counselling Needs at Pre- Primary School Level in Lagos State, Nigeria Sarah SOPEKAN and Abiola Y. FASHINA	548
Entrepreneurship Education and Creativity: Teachers' Role Towards its Promotion amongst Primary School Pupils in Lagos State, Nigeria Temitope HARRY, Joyce E. OGWAZU, Esther OWOJINRIN, Justina C. AGUH and Monsurat A. BANIRE	563
Entrepreneurial Education as a Tool for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State Nkechinyere M. OKORONKWO, Gertrude O. NNAMSO and Perpetual N. UGORJI	579
The English Language Teacher in an ECCE Centre as Conduit for a Sustainable Language Development K. I. DUNG and G. T. KITGAKKA	597
A Survey of Parents' and Caregivers' Attitude to Nutrition of Pre-School Children in Lagos State B. G. ABIDOGUN, M. A. LAMIDI, A. T. ESOIMEME and S. A. OGUNMADE	607
Early Childhood Care and Education as a Tool for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals Mairo OMAR	618
Nutritional Deficiencies: A Major Factor to Developmental Conundrum A. A. AKANJI and Adefunke T. KOMOLAFE	631
Religious Education in The Early Childhood Stage: A Pathway to Sustainable Development in Nigeria O. D. OJO and Eniola K. OLA-ALANI	646

Childhood Education Teacher Training and Teaching of Science and Mathematics: Implications for Nigerian Teacher Education Olabisi ADEDIGBA and Blessing O. OLOFINTOYE	656
The Educational Implications of Teachers-Pupils' Gender on Achievement and Interest of Primary School Pupils in Social Studies Elizabeth O. ABOLUWARIN	682
Education Psychology for the Training of Mind and Character in Childhood Education to Achieve Sustainable Development Goals A. A. BABANGIDA, A. MUSTAPHA and Otu P. AWEH	699
A Qualitative Study of Children's Experience of Poverty in their Education: Implications for the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria B. G. ABIDOGUN, Joy C. OKECHUKWU, O. ADEYEMI and Olubunmi OLALOYE	718

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD STAGE: A PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of Religious Education in attaining sustainable development in Nigeria. The country is battling with some challenges presently such as armed robbery, kidnapping, ethno-religious conflicts, poverty, economic recession, unemployment, indiscipline and social disorder among others. A country that is faced with such problems will lack the wherewithal to bring about sustainable development. This paper is, therefore, advocating the teaching and practising of ethical re-orientation and moral standard through religious education in order to bring about stable, disciplined and morally upright citizens of this nation. Data were gathered from books, journals and newspapers, and critically analysed. The paper posits that Religious Education is a pathway to developing and harnessing both human and natural resources for sustainable development and submits that science and technology cannot do it alone without bringing religious education. Suggestions and recommendations are made on how to attain sustainable development for this generation and those coming behind.

Keywords: Religious Education, Development, Sustainable Development

Introduction

The need to move Nigeria from its present status as a developing country or third world nation to a developed one has been the desire of every successive government in Nigeria. This can be seen in the various

projects and policies that are being initiated from time to time. However, no matter how these agitations may be, there are some factors drawing the country back from achieving sustainable development. Almost all the national developmental projects embarked upon by successive government failed grossly, according to Mordi (2015) because of insincerity, lack of commitment, corruption and bad implementation. Achebe (1993) and Uche (2010) identified corruption as the cause of the failure of the developmental strategies put in place in Nigeria. The issue of peace and harmonious co-existence is another factor militating against sustainable development in Nigeria, as development cannot take place in any nation without human security (Akomode, 2004).

Nigeria is battling with so many security challenges such as armed robbery, abduction, kidnapping and political violence (Onah, 2017). There have been violent conflicts between different ethnic groups in Nigeria. For instance, Ife-Modakeke crisis in Osun state, Jukun-Tiv war in Taraba state, Urhobo-Izon, Itshekiri crisis in Warri (Egwu, 2001, Sulaiman & Ojo, 2012). The Boko Haam insurgencies in the North East have rendered many homeless and victims have become refugees in Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs) camp. These crises have led to loss of human capital and material resources and, therefore economic growth, educational advancement and political stability and sustainable development are far from this country.

According to Achebe (1983), there is nothing basically wrong with Nigeria or climate or water, air or any other thing else. "The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility and to the challenge of personal example, which is the hallmark of true leadership". It is not only the rulers, the people also contribute in no small measure to the ruination of the nation. This is done simply by disrespecting constituted authorities, sometime apathy and absence of commitment of the behaviour of the citizens for conducive and rancor free atmosphere necessary for progress. He also observed that "indiscipline pervades the lives of citizens today that one may be justified in calling it the condition per excellence of contemporary Nigeria society". Indiscipline in the home, in the school, in the public service, in the private sector, in the government and in legislative assemblies is heard and read every day. There is the failure or

refusal to submit one's desire and actions to the restraints of orderly social conduct in recognition of the rights and desires of others. Nigeria is a multi-religious society, though it has certain values, teaching and beliefs in common such as honesty, hard work, sincerity, peace and others. This study opined that early childhood stage is a critical period of rapid physical, cognitive and psycho-social development of the child. The quality of care and education which a child receives at this critical stage will determine, to a great extent, the level of his physical, cognitive development in the future. Therefore, religious education at the early childhood stage can be as a pathway to teaching sincerity of purpose in the discharge of duties of every citizen of this country in order to attain sustainable development. If religious education precepts and values are inculcated effectively in the early stage and sustained, we might see a better Nigeria in the nearest future.

Sustainable development is an attempt to shape and secure the future and it means conservation, reservation, usage and management of resources so that what is done to improve life and living standard today does not compromise future use of such resources and improvement in the quality of life for all the people (Oyebamiji, Adekola, Ugwu, 2009). Religious Education will play a great role in the effective implementation of the 17 goals contained in the Global Goals. These 17 goals and 169 targets are built on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which seek to achieve eight major goals among which are poverty reduction, hunger, disease, gender inequality, access to water and sanitation, reduction in maternal mortality rate, basic education and access to information and communication technology. The aim is that by the year 2030 the world would have achieved sustainable development for humanity and as well safe-guarded planet earth. The thrust of this paper, therefore, is that, if this goals are carried out and followed vigorously with all sincerity of heart through religious education, sustainable development can be achieved in this country.

Religious Education

Early childhood education is a starting point for a child's development. This type of education is recognised by the Nigerian National Policy on Education (FRN, 2012). In fact, Christian Religious Education is one of the core subjects that are being taken at this stage. Some of the

objectives of teaching the subject in the childhood stage amongst others include

- a. to give pupils opportunities to develop their knowledge and understanding of religion and beliefs;
- b. to promote the spiritual, moral, cultural and intellectual development of the children;
- c. to have respect for other peoples' views and accelerate the diversity of the society and
- d. to foster understanding about the importance of tolerance in everyday life.

In its loose and ordinary sense, Religious Education is the teaching of a particular religion or teaching of religion in general and its varied aspects, its beliefs, devotion, rituals, customs, rites, and personal roles. Religious Education implies a type of education which is largely separate from rigorous academia, which regards religious belief as a fundamental tenet and operating modality. Mordi (2015), averred that Religious Education connotes the dominant academic study, and in typically religious terms, teaches doctrines which refine and define social customs and societal norms as laws. Religious Education, according to Irika (2014), is the norms, customs, ethos and the social ethical norms of the society.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development has also been defined in many ways by different scholars. The Brundtland Commission Report defined it as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs (United Nations General Assembly, 1987). For Mordi (2015), sustainable development means the process of growth in individual and socio economic levels of progress in a given society. A development that is sustainable is understood to mean the innovational changes, growth and strategies which bring about these changes and endure the test of time. In a very simple term, it is the development that stands the test of time. Sustainable Development in Nigeria suggests that the overall well-being of the people today, be it economic, environmental,

social, political and otherwise should be maintained and sustained for the future generation.

Religious Education and Sustainable Development

To achieve some of Sustainable Development Goals, different countries have been urged to evolve different strategies. The task of achieving these goals is enormous. However, the need to involve Religious Education as a pathway cannot be overemphasized. According to Mordi (2015), Religious Education promotes and sustains religion and its tenets, beliefs and practices. Religious Education therefore, presents religion as that which unites the human with the divine. In the light of this, therefore, to save Nigeria from social decay and persistent lack of sustainable development, despite the developmental strategies in the past, the social functions of Religious Education should be positively applied and harnessed to the project of national sustainable development in Nigeria as this will promote and foster development in all ramifications.

The impetus to do the right thing at the right time is key to sustainable development. The religious teachings on morality come in here, since man cannot develop without it. According to Epenyong (2011), to attempt to build a nation without God is to hope to construct a massive structure upon the foundation of sand, such building will collapse with the slightest gust of wind. Thus, it is apt to add that one of the universal functions of religion is to help to promote the society. The role of religion in national development is to tell the people that, social justice, egalitarian and building of a country is not merely man-conceived, but it is ordained by God. Therefore, whatever that is being done today should not be for the interest or for a particular group of people, but it should be for the good of this generation and be sustained for future generations to come.

Religious Education teaches people to be patriotic and committed to the building of the nation. Religious Education at the early childhood stage, therefore, helps to incorporate religious values and discipline which help pupils later in the society for peaceful coexistence and national development. For instance, Christian religion teaches civic responsibility which is summarised as serving one's country, commitment and contributing to the development of the society.

Therefore by the time the pupils are brought up in their civic and moral responsibilities and obligation, they would become patriotic and loving human beings. The sustainable development goals should be pursued with all zeal in order to see that poverty is stamped out in the country, hunger is eradicated and the well-being of the individual is cared for.

Iwenfu (2010) argued that the goal of religious and moral education is for national development and that the teaching of religious education influences people's lives in every time and every place. The implication of this is that every person or individual saddled with the implementation of the 2030 agenda will have it behind his or her mind that he or she is to execute the projects to the best of his or her ability and for the betterment of the nation in general.

In Nigeria, corruption is on the high gear, especially among those at the corridors of power and this poses a big challenge to both religion and Religious Education. If Religious Education would be relevant to the Nigerian nation, religious leaders should brace up to the expectations of their responsibility of providing moral guidelines and spiritual checks and balances. Religious Education should articulate vividly, functional ways of addressing the immoral dispositions of Nigerians and in the way, it would be able to address the moral decadence in the society. Religious Education can now be used as a medium of teaching the need to be disciplined, patriotic and encourage people to be morally upright in discharging their duties for sustainable development in the country. For instance, poverty cannot be eradicated or overcome when a small group of people amasses the wealth of the nation and the generality of the population are suffering because they could not make ends meet.

Religious Education at the early childhood stage is very essential because of the religious diversity that exists in the country. The three major religions educate their members differently either through their sacred books in the various places of worship or oral traditions handed down from their forefathers. For instance, Christianity teaches peace and non-violence. Islam also calls for quest for peace, tolerance and kindness which is a state of physical, mental, spiritual and social harmony. Highlighting these relationships will promote mutual understanding and tolerance among people of different religions.

Peace is the absence of war. However, Okwueze (2003) maintained it is not merely the absence of war nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies nor is it brought about by dictatorship. In a country where there are violent conflicts, abuse of human rights, insecurity of lives and property, development suffers setback. This is part of what the 2030 Global Agenda is set to sustain, that is, peace, justice and strong institutions. In view of this, Ekpenyong (2011) stated that violent conflicts disrupt the process of production, create condition for pillage of the country's resources and divert their application from development purposes to servicing war.

Religious Education is an instrument of social order. Through the teaching and promotion of religious traditions, restrictions are made, prohibitions and peace drives are encouraged. No country can develop under tension, disaster or chaos. It is only under a peaceful and orderly atmosphere that development can take place. By preaching peace and obedience to the law of the land, Religious Education promotes order which results into a favourable atmosphere for business to thrive. In this way, Religious Education helps to bring about sustainable development in Nigeria. Mordi (2017) opined that Religious Education promotes social norms that keep the society together and reviews social commitment to the socially desirable behaviour which in the long run creates sustainable behaviour in Nigeria. It also complements sustainable development by conscientising Nigerians to act accordingly and not to derail from the objectives of the 2030 agenda. Whatever that is done today will have a repercussion on the generations to come.

Onah (2017) posited that Religious Education should be used to inculcate respect for the dignity of man. It should emphasise virtues such as love, tolerance, brotherhood, reconciliation, justice, kindness, humility, unity, self-discipline and respect for human life. These values can, therefore, act as catalyst to achieving peace and tranquillity in the Nigerian society. Peace and tranquillity enhances economic growth and sustainable development. Ogwu (2001) noted that no religion proceeds with the primary objective of provoking chaos and precipitating social integration among people and communities. Rather, all religions seek to reconcile and integrate people across ethnic, racial, class and other socio cultural divides. According to Ikani (2002), religion is an efficient

means of social control which stimulates social habits and checks anti-social tendencies. It also teaches and fosters forgiveness, promotes truth, confidence and commitment among people. These moral values do not only promote peaceful coexistence, but are also instrumental to nation building and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Religious Education brings people together as good citizens and nurtures them to be nation builders and agents of change in the society. In order to attain sustainable development, corruption, moral decadence and other vices should be stamped out and give room for peace and harmony. Nigeria is a nation flowing with milk and honey, therefore, the abundant natural and economic and material resources in the country should be properly utilised and not be misused because of the coming generations. Sustainable development can only take place where there is peace and understanding. In a situation where there is ethno-religious tension and conflicts all the time, nobody will be interested in residing in such places and, in fact, no foreigner will come to invest in the country. Nigerians should, therefore, let peace reign.

The Bible says "train up a child the way he should go and when he grows he will not depart from it". Religious Education at the childhood stage will give pupils opportunities to develop their knowledge and understanding and would enable them to consider and respond to a range of important questions related to their own spiritual development, development of values, attitudes and fundamental questions concerning the meaning of life and purpose of sustainable development.

Recommendations

People should be well educated on the possible contributions of religion to sustainable development. The development of any nation is hinged on peace. Therefore, for sustainable development to be achieved either in the short or long run term, peace should be given a chance.

Religious Education should, right from the early childhood stage, emphasises on the common areas that unite the three major religions and not on the areas of differences so that there will be mutual understanding and tolerance among the people.

Science and Technology is being emphasised to the detriment of Religious Education, whereas it is a morally sound mind that can make science and technology work. Therefore, Religious Education should be accorded priority at the early childhood stage and qualified teachers should be employed to teach in order to bring about sustainable development.

Pupils should be made to know that appropriate sanctions would be meted out to whosoever goes against the law and disturbs the peace of the environment or community. The law enforcement agencies will take necessary action no matter whose ox is gored. Sustainable development can only be achieved if there is security and the well-being of the individual is guaranteed.

Religious Education at the early childhood stage should be used to condemn corruption, indiscipline, moral decadence and all that is not ideal and thereby using good character in Religious Education as models worthy of emulation that pupils should follow or emulate as they grow up.

Religious Education should contribute not only to the personal reflection and development of young people, but should also respect the belief of others and help build a diverse but cohesive society. This will eliminate or reduce religious bigotry, over zealousness and promote peaceful co-existence.

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