

ENHANCING YOUTH EMPOWERMENT THROUGH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper present religious education as a strategy for youth empowerment. It also highlights the concept of religious education and youth empowerment. It recommends among others that there is need to reposition religious education in order to make it highly responsive to youth challenges and help them contribute to sustainable national development in Nigeria.

Youth empowerment has become an important issue that cannot be overlooked by any nation that aspires for development. Much importance is attached to the participation of youths because they serve as a good force in transforming the national socio-economic order. In Nigeria, they are not just a major part of the population as shown by the statistics but worsening over the years are youth challenges which are assuming crisis proportions (Ruhl, 2012). This has become more pronounced particularly in our educational sector and even the wider society. Olumodeji, Ejikene and Idyorough, (2001:92) observed that:

Unfortunately, children and young persons in Nigeria are increasingly engaging in criminal and delinquent attitudes, which have serious implications for them and the nation.

The criminal and delinquent preoccupations of children and young persons in the country include the misuse and selling of alcohol and other drugs such as cocaine, examination malpractices, membership of secret cults, violent school demonstrations, sexual harassment, rape and other sexual deviations which are largely alcohol or drug related crimes and armed robbery.

All these have great implications in all aspects of national development. This is why also in recent years there has been increasing recognition of the political urgency in responding to the challenges of youths as a precondition for sustainable development and lasting peace (Ugwoke, 2010). The issue has also called for the need for good educational foundation that can impact in a holistic way relevant

knowledge and skills that will empower young people to enable them engage in productive and self fulfilling life, work, develop positive attitudes and values in dealing with the paradox and conflict generated by change. Religious education has an important role to play in resolving some of these challenges or crises.

The Concept of Religious Education

Religious education which forms an integral part of Nigeria educational system according to Usman (2002) is that learning process that tends to promote the exploration of religion and experience as well as the development of attitudes. To Ilori, (2010) it is education that is God centered, life applied and involves all those requirements which characterize in general any genuine education truly aimed at helping a child or an individual to attain his full formation as a man.

For religious education the child is a personality with its character which under proper guidance can grow and develop from within. Therefore its task is to promote growth in spiritual characters by guiding the learner. This forms part of the reason why the National Policy on Education (2004:10) placed value in the teaching and learning of the subject in the school curriculum. It stated that “education infused with religious instruction is believed to be capable of developing Nigerians who will be properly integrated into the mainstream of good citizenry”. Also in 1984, the National Ethical Reorientation Committee (NERC) came into existence. In its declaration, the

committee admitted the collapse of the country’s ethics, discipline and morality (Nwosu, 1984). In an attempt to solve the problems, it proclaimed among others that religious education has an important and crucial role to play in any effective moral educational programme. Accordingly, it recommended that all institutions involved in teaching education should mount relevant programmes for effective religious and moral education.

However, the subject has not been given the due recognition it deserves. This became more pronounced with the take over of schools by the government. As a result, religious and moral education is either an optional subject or completely dropped. Many educators according to Ilori (2002) have come to believe that our education system is woefully inadequate as measured by results in moral living. A closer look at the youths in schools and higher institutions shows that there is something wrong. Odunze (1990) asserted that like in other areas of our social life morality has lost its grip in our institutions. According to him one cannot disprove that some years back we used to have a more disciplined tutorial student bodies in our schools than what we have now. Our citadels of higher learning which are meant to turn out intellectuals who are to be the nations pride and future leaders have ended up a breeding place for vices such as examination malpractices, sexual perversion, prostitution, cultism, nudity or indecent dressing etc.

There is no doubt that the lack of inadequate attention given to the teaching of religious education in our school system have created a wide gap in the upbringing of the Nigerian youth and will continue as the years go by if left unchecked (Gbari, 2006). The challenge that Nigeria faces today is how to guide, direct and empower the ever increasing growing population of youths through education so that they can make maximum use of their potential and also fit into the process of nation building.

The Concept of Youth Empowerment

Youth in Nigeria constitutes the major percentage of the population and their importance to the present and future development of the nation cannot be underestimated. The political bureau (1987) observed that in the context of Nigeria's historical experience the term refers to those between 6 – 30 years and those within this age group form about 56 percent of the population. Antanwu (2010) stated that they are "that part of the society that have departed from childhood and are entering a new phase of adulthood to grapple with the reality of their society". It is a period of great biological and physiological changes in the life of an individual, internal stress, strain and crises. At this stage youth could be a problem to parents, teachers, the church, institutions and the government if they are not handled well. According to Iremeka (2007) it is all about working with youth to help them acquire the needed knowledge and then develop necessary skills, competence and attitudes which will make them become active agents in their society rather than

victims of societal development and changes. It is therefore all about positively affecting their present position for good and making them contribute to the general development of the society.

Youth empowerment has become imperative today because it is seen as a vital ingredient in maintaining the social stability of our youth and to support nation building initiatives in Nigeria. The Social Development Policy of Nigeria (1989) believes that what the Nigerian youth need in today's challenging world are emotional stability, self concept, identity, sense of belonging, intellectual and moral development, education, self-realization, good leadership and training to prepare them for their future role in the society.

Religious Education and Youth Empowerment

Education generally forms the backbone of any nation's development and a reliable source of empowerment in the acquisition of skills and knowledge (Ugwu, 2011). The National Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS, 2004) recognized it as a vital transformational tool and a formidable instrument for socio-economic empowerment. Religious education which constitutes an important complement of formal education has the potential to help individuals or our youths if properly planned and implemented.

A principal area that religious education can help empower youth is in the area of character promotion which has become a deepening concern in the

society. Young people require personal and social skills to function confidently and competently with themselves, with people and the wider community. Character is destiny and according to Orhunger (2003) it consists in knowing the good, desiring and doing it. To him no one has all the virtues and everyone has one form of weakness or the other. Moral behaviour like honesty, integrity, respect for truth, tolerance for other people feelings, sexual control and responsible citizenship are essential ingredients for character development. These special abilities for adoptive and positive behaviour are products of the human heart. These qualities cannot be enforced by the force of arm. This is to say they cannot exist in an individual (youth) if they do not first and foremost exist in their mind and heart. This is where the teaching of religion comes in. The task of religion is that of promoting growth in spiritual character by guiding the pupils according to the discoverable law of growth (Ilori 1992). Facts learned can produce and develop in youth positive, good and helpful attitudes. This is because our standards of judgment are the product of our religious training both direct and indirect. This has become necessary because the biggest change that our youths need today is their mindset. There is need for nobility of character through which they can shun easy-way-out life option in the quest for success, which is a reason why there are rampant cases of examination and fraudulent practices among our youths. No person can make a positive contribution to the society without having a morally upright character and seldom

will one have one without having been taught such when she or he was young. Education without good character may be a good foundation for crime and general destructiveness.

Also the subject of religious education can help our youths to understand and interpret their lives. Change as we know is, inevitable as long as we live. Research in adolescent development indicates that this stage is one of struggles, often because of the absence of certain skills that would have helped them cope (Okpananchi, Odiba & Aminu, 2005). Idakpo (2006) stated that Nigerian youths in schools feel insecure and uncertain about life hence they need answers. This is to say that their problems are not primarily economic, political and social in nature but rather they are spiritual in a wider sense. Science and technology have played an important role in the development of man but do not provide all the answers to problems of human existence. For example, the existence of God, pain, life after death, coping with emotions and stress. Some of these challenges can be explained through religious beliefs as communicated by religious education. Taking the Christian religions as an example, the gospel of Christ is a wholistic one. He preached, healed, provided food, encouraged people and comforted the broken hearted. Religious beliefs or faith based approach can help influence how youths perceive and interpret challenges which they encounter on a daily basis. Without religious motivation and explanation of life the minds of youths can constitute a

fruitful soil for the propagation of error. This will make them to turn to secret cults, charm and superstition for solutions.

Conclusion

The Nigerian youths of today have great potentials. The government needs to invest more in the areas that will develop them which will automatically give strength to the nation's political, economic and social issues and their full participation in them.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are advanced

- i. Since positive attitudes and values can only be effectively acquired through planned school curriculum, there is an urgent need to make the subject of religious education compulsory both at the primary and secondary levels by the federal government.
- ii. Religious Education curriculum must be reformed to possess ingredients capable of equipping the learners with skills, understanding, attitudes and habits that can contribute in achieving value education. This will help to transmit into the younger ones, the Nigerian society's good norms or value orientations. It will make them realize the fact that they can develop their potentials and contribute their talents to the common good of all. This will prepare them also for every eventuality in terms of social survival.
- iii. To achieve the teaching objectives of Religious Education in the Nigerian

school system, qualified teachers of the subject should be made available in schools by the government at both the primary and secondary levels. This will enhance the effective teaching of the subject.

- iv. It is also desirable that the Nigerian youth be accessible to counseling services by school religious counselors. The benefits of adequate information cannot be quantified.

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