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Conditions of Learning for Democracy and Peace in Sub-Sahara Africa: Case of Nigeria

Abstract

This article examines the experiences of Christian Church leaders about the contribution of peace and democracy education in Nigerian faith-based schools as a basis for a just and stable society. The role of education in shaping democracy and peace especially in ongoing conflict context is pivotal, meanwhile there is paucity of research especially in areas of conflict in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Njobati, 2021, p. 25; Burde et al., 2017, p. 620; Bajaj, 2015, p. 1–2; Krogull, Scheunpflug & Rwambonera, 2014, pp. 13–16). Existing studies mainly address wars, unstable governments and economy (Brunori et al., 2019, Babajide et al., 2021). This paper focuses on the case of the conflict in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria and its effects on education where schools have been attacked and children forced out of schools with girls violated (Njobati, 2021; Opara & Inmpey, 2019, p.109). Meanwhile, Christian Church organizations are playing an important role through conflict resolution and peace education (Ilo, 2015, p. 99). The qualitative research included 13 semi-structured interviews with leaders of Roman Catholic and Protestant church organizations about their experiences on how peace and democracy education activities in the faith-based schools is shaping learning conditions.

Findings show a varied nature of the relationship between conflict and learning for peace and democracy. On the one hand, peace clubs in schools are perceived to offer safe spaces for learning. On the other hand, everyday school life is still characterized by normative discipline that stir conflict and overlook the conditions of learning. Aspects such as good learning climate, critical thinking, problem solving and cooperative learning which have been established based on evidence as key elements of peace and democracy education (Dewey, 2024, p. XV, Burde et al., 2017, p. 620; Bajaj, 2015, p. 1–2; Krogull et al., 2014, pp. 17–72), do not feature in the pedagogical understanding of schools. The paper concludes that further professional development for church and educational leaders is needed on the global understanding of peace and democracy and how to contextualize this for better learning and wellbeing of children in a conflict environment.

Keywords: *democracy education, peace education, social justice, quality education*

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht die Erfahrungen christlicher Kirchenleitungen mit Friedens- und Demokratieerziehung in konfessionellen Schulen in Nigeria als Beitrag für eine gerechte und stabile Gesellschaft. Die Rolle von Bildung bei der Gestaltung von Demokratie und Frieden ist von entscheidender Bedeutung, insbesondere in einem anhaltenden Konfliktkontext, auch wenn es zu den Konfliktgebieten in Subsahara-Afrika (SSA) nur wenige Forschungsarbeiten gibt (Njobati, 2021, S. 25; Burde et al., 2017, S. 620; Bajaj, 2015, S. 1–2; Krogull, Scheunpflug & Rwambonera, 2014, S. 13–16). Die bisher vorliegenden Studien befassen sich hauptsächlich mit Kriegen, instabilen Regierungen und deren ökonomischen Folgen (Brunori et al., 2019, Babajide et al., 2021). Dieser Artikel konzentriert sich hingegen auf die Auswirkungen von Konflikten auf Bildung am Beispiel der Middle Belt-Region Nigerias. Dort werden gezielt Schulen angegriffen, Kinder aus den Schulen vertrieben und Mädchen vergewaltigt (Njobati, 2021; Opara & Inmpey, 2019, S. 109). In dieser Situation spielen christliche Kirchen eine wichtige Rolle bei der Konfliktlösung und Friedenserziehung (Ilo, 2015, S. 99). Die hier vorgestellt qualitative Studie stützt sich auf 13 halbstrukturierte Interviews mit Führungskräften römisch-katholischer und protestantischer Kirchenorganisationen zu ihren Erfahrungen mit der Wirkung friedens- und demokratiepädagogischer Aktivitäten in konfessionellen Schulen auf Lernbedingungen.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen vielfältige Relationen zwischen Konfliktlagen und dem Lernen für Frieden und Demokratie. Einerseits wird davon ausgegangen, dass Friedensclubs in Schulen sichere Lernräume bieten. Andererseits ist der Schulalltag immer noch von normativer Disziplin geprägt, die Konflikte schürt und die äußeren Lernbedingungen außer Acht lässt. Aspekte wie ein gutes Lernklima, kritisches Denken, Problemlösung und kooperatives Lernen, die sich auf der Grundlage empirischer Erkenntnisse als Schlüsselelemente der Friedens- und Demokratieerziehung etabliert haben (Dewey, 2024, S. XV, Burde et al., 2017, S. 620; Bajaj, 2015, S. 1–2; Krogull et al., 2014, S. 17–72), finden im pädagogischen Verständnis von Schulen hingegen wenig Berücksichtigung. Es wird der Schluss gezogen, dass eine berufliche Weiterentwicklung von Kir-

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chen- und Bildungsleitenden ein globaleres Verständnis von Frieden und Demokratie und Fragen der Kontextualisierung für ein besseres Lernen und Wohlbefinden von Kindern in einem Konfliktumfeld einschließen muss.

Schlüsselworte: *Demokratiebildung, Friedensbildung, soziale Gerechtigkeit, hochwertige Bildung*

Introduction

The debate regarding children's exposure to a diversity of violent conflicts underscores the necessity of education that fosters social justice, peace and democracy especially in resource-limited contexts like Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where the level of educational quality still remains a challenge (Gentz et al., 2021, p. 1). This paper investigates learning conditions for peace and democratic education in faith-based schools through a qualitative research in Nigeria's Middle Belt region. The study highlights the experiences of Christian church leaders involved in faith-based non-state schools.

The Middle Belt region of Nigeria, shaped by ethno-religious conflicts

Nigeria experiences complex forms of violence and conflicts including violent attacks by the Boko Haram fundamentalist group with negative effects on education whereby girls are violated and schools burnt down, with children and youths as victims and actors (Piereder, 2014, p. 71). The Middle Belt region, in which this study is contextualized, is a multi-ethnic area where the mainly Muslim north meets the largely Christian south. The region experiences violent conflicts described as ethno-religious (Ilo, 2015, p. 100–106). However, the causes could be rooted in land resources, population growth and climate change, especially given that Nigeria faces the challenge of governance and conditions for inclusive growth with 40% of the population living in extreme poverty (World bank, 2019, p. 9). That notwithstanding, Christian church organizations in Nigeria, besides the important role they play in peace building and education within schools, also contribute to conflict resolutions and cohesion in communities even if this role does not seem to be recognized (Rugah, 2020; Federal Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 22–67).

Theoretical background: Peace education, education for democracy and social justice

The narratives of how to support children to develop and respond to challenges of conflicts and violence in their environment show that schools have the greatest impact through the offer of safe spaces for learning (Ungar et al.; 2019; Bajaj, 2015, p. 1). Accordingly, one of the foundations of safe spaces in schools is rooted in democratic and peace education, especially in a challenging democratic context (Basedau, 2023, p. 1; Magro, 2015, p. 109). Therefore, in precarious context of conflicts, peace and transformative education is argued to be appropriate as it challenges pedagogy that is rooted in hierarchical forms of power but rather seeks to respond to democratic participation, freedom and social justice that surmount national limits (Basedau, 2023, p. 1, Magro, 2015, p. 109). In this circumstance, it is relevant to reflect peace education and education for democracy in an interconnected way.

Even though peace education understanding is complex, its overarching questions address inequality gaps, democratic processes of dealing with conflict and issues of global social justice (Jäger, 2015; Magro, 2015, p. 109). From this premise, sustainable peace education, otherwise considered critical peace education is upheld as it emphasizes on a just, democratic and sustainable world (Galtung, 2023, p. 81; Moraes et al., 2023, p. 147–148). Therefore, peace education understanding would emphasize on justice as underlined by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16 (United Nations, 2015) thereby also responding to social, ecological, and economic dimensions. Furthermore, justice sensitive education incorporates self-esteem, autonomy, critical thinking, problem-solving, democratic and participatory approaches that are embedded in social competences (Davies, 2017; Krogull et al., 2014, pp. 17–48). By extension, the understanding of education for democracy emphasizes on the important role of schools not only to focus on the specific knowledge about democracy but also to address the social development dimension like responsible freedom and sustainable human development (Maryanto & Khoiriyah, 2017, p. 277; Lange, Njobati & Scheunpflug, 2013, p. 127–128). Democracy and education as underlined in Dewey's work seem to connect the two concepts with the argument that both involve self-determination, self-development and participating for the common good, ensuring equity and guided by social and moral responsibility (Dewey, 2024, p. XV; Hand, 2023, pp. 146–147). Arguably, democratic education therefore seems to give an orientation to social justice that embeds Paulo Freire's socially just forms of democratic life (Bialystok, 2023, p. 180; Roberts, 2023, p. 90). From this perspective, the debate about children exposed to various forms of violence and adversities, would necessitate resilience development, peace and democracy education (Gentz et al., 2021, p. 1). A study from the post-conflict context of Rwanda in SSA has positioned peace and democratic teaching culture and the development of social competences in schools as the foundation for sustainable societal cohesion (Krogull et al., 2014, pp. 17–48).

Research methodology

Based on the problem description analysed earlier in the introduction, the study was guided by the following question: What are the experiences of Christian Church leaders about the contribution of peace and democracy education to the learning conditions in Nigerian faith-based schools? Given that the study is new in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, a qualitative approach was adopted (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Data was collected by semi-structured interviews (Morse et al., 2021, p. 6; Charmaz, 2014, p. 58–65) from 13 leaders of Roman Catholic and Protestant church organizations in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria to get their in-depth and subjective perspectives

about the contribution of peace education in schools (Evans & Lewis, 2018; Flick, 2009). The sample of the study were men and women drawn from amongst Christian church umbrella organizations, schools, church organizations involved in justice and peace, church congregations, and church-based funding organizations. As COVID-19 pandemic security restrictions at the time did not allow for face-to-face meetings, interviews were collected by digital means through Zoom, Skype or WhatsApp. For the purpose of ethical consideration, the names of the participants were anonymized (Surmiak, 2020) using names of food crops in Nigeria. Data constituted by interview transcripts was analysed by content analysis (Mayring, 2014) using a software program, MAXQDA.

Findings[1]: Processes and conditions of learning – a potential for understanding peace and democracy education

In line with the material of the study and based on the research question that seeks the understanding of Christian Church leaders about the contribution of peace and democracy education in schools, the results of the study are described (see Njobati, 2021. pp 27–29). These findings are differentiated into three themes: First about the understanding of what peace club activities in schools are serving for. This is followed by the understanding of the learning conditions for peace and democracy education and finally, the understanding of peace and democracy education.

Understanding based on what peace club activities in schools are serving for: Christian church leaders perceive the contribution to positive change in students' life and learning experience

In regard to the understanding of what peace clubs in schools are serving for, Church leaders explain these clubs play an important role in enhancing students' learning experiences. This insight is drawn from interviews that highlight the quality of the field, as detailed below. In the quotation that follows, Yam talks about a change in the attitude of a boy who was previously engaged in acts of violence towards girls at school. During the interview, she narrated the processes used by peace clubs to facilitate this change and explained:

"In one of the schools where this program on peace clubs was run [...] there is a young boy, that has been physically violent on young girls. And of course the school was about to suspend him, and we pleaded with the management of the school to allow us intervene [...] part of our work and mandate is to actually hear from all sides, so we interviewed the boy [...] and he explained that his father usually beat his mother at home, and the father encouraged him never to tolerate any woman who belittles him, and so for that, and every day he comes to school he acts this way and beats girls [...] We met the father and we told him the details and discussed elaborately[...]at the end to cut the long story short, we all had a common understanding and together with the parents we went to the school to resolve this issue amicably. From that moment onwards, the vowed never to do so and he never did it until he graduated from that school." (Yam, lines 399–415)

Yam's explanation above shows that peace clubs in schools actively involve parents, school management, and students in the process of fostering change. Complementing this perspective, Cassava's interview sheds light on the religious inclusivity within these clubs and the students' roles in peer mediation. Cassava reported in the following quotation from the interview:

"We are actually partnering and starting clubs in schools; you train the students on how to mediate, including those from both Christian and Muslim backgrounds. Peer mediators resolve issues within the school without needing to refer to the guardian counselor master, and instead, they report their successes" (Cassava, lines 456–463).

Additionally, another interview from Pumpkin (lines 140–146) emphasizes the role of peace education in facilitating trauma healing among children and the possibilities of curbing violence reproduction. From the material described, the understanding of the contribution of peace education is schools is limited to individual learning experiences in the grassroots of the local context.

Understanding of learning conditions for peace and democracy education: Christian church leaders show two-sided understandings: One dimension emphasizes safe learning conditions and the other focuses on normative aspects of discipline

As far as learning conditions is concerned, the leaders of Christian church organizations express varied under-standings. Some perceptions emphasize on participatory and inclusive learning environment while some emphasize on normative forms of discipline and morality. All of these dimensions of understandings are drawn from the interviews that shape the quality of the field. In the following quotation, Maize, an actor from a church funding organization, explains that schools need to have safe places through quality education to enhance better learning:

"[...] just to mention to say we want to support peace initiative, we need to start a school project because schools are so crucial, I mean this all everything I introduce schools first of all, to have a quality of education, schools have to be a safe place [...] it's not enough to have peace education in schools, it is like a step before, we have to know a bit more, what have we first to do to have a school as a safe place and then of course peace education is of course one element [...] in conflict and also post conflict regions it is very important to face violence like a structural problem, that's why we must also think about the prevention of violence or to make schools a safe place for all the children and we identify that the most vulnerable in schools are girls and so our focus in schools are girls" (Maize, lines 168–177). The statement of Maize above highlights violence in the context of the study as a structural problem necessitates quality education to enhance safe places of learning. Other materials from the interview of Njangsa emphasizes on the tolerance to religious diversity as she reports: "Just like I said, [...], they have seen that the school is really good, like this small one, the place I am, majority of the people are not members of our church (name of church withheld), like I said, it's a mixture of the villagers, [...]. Yes, we have Christians, some of them are even Muslims" (Njangsa, lines 174–178). In addition to

the provision of safe places and religious tolerance, some materials from the study highlight the offer of access to the disadvantaged students as shown in the interview quotation from Groundnut: "[...] if we go for all the best candidates who will help the non-best candidates, in the course of our admission we consider those candidates who even emerge with B or C class, we still take them in, and we help them [...] some come from very disadvantaged environments from their primary school level, [...] so our job also is to get a support for them, [...] and that enables us to carry everybody along" (Groundnut, lines 73–95).

On the other hand, some other materials from the study show learning situation characterized by normative discipline and a call for morality. In the following interview quotation, Okro emphasizes on strict discipline, the call for obedience and morality as he says:

"One of the things we do is that we give punishment to a child who is involved in that, you ask him to cut the grasses outside or pick some stones and fill up some areas that needs to be refilled, its actually the disciplinary committee that decides on what punishment has to be given depending on the gravity of the problem. So they decide and sometimes we make them to apologize on the assembly ground, we could punish them by flogging them and then we make them to apologize, to say they are sorry for the behaviour and of course it's that type of behavior that is being counseled by school guardian counselors. And we also have a chaplain in the school who will also pray for them." (Okro, lines 230–238).

Besides the focus on punishment as shown on the statement of Okro above, he also emphasizes on connecting the content of school subjects to faith as he explains in the following segment from his interview: "As the head of the school, I've been able to let teachers know that biology is not a separate subject from their Christian lives, so while teaching biology, we expect them to bring in Christian biblical referencing to incorporate into what they are teaching the students [...] we cannot carry bible away from whatever we are teaching." (Okro, lines 122–133).

From the descriptions above, the statements from the interviews of church leaders show varied understanding regarding learning conditions for peace and democracy. While some materials from the study show an inclusive and safe learning space understanding, other materials emphasize normative discipline and combining school subjects to faith.

Understanding of peace and democracy education: Christian church leaders show a varied understanding of peace and democratic education: not all the ideas are adequate for global peace and democracy

Regarding peace and democracy education, the materials from the study shows a varied understanding. Some of the material from the study show church leaders' under-standing that justice is only sought when there is conflict. For example in the quotation from the interview of Carrot that follows, he explains: "Yes Peace comes first. Where there is peace and people are living together in harmony, there is no need for justice. But when there is conflict and people are trying to retaliate, and to console them, then there will be justice" (Carrot, lines 293–296). Based on what Carrot explains, when people live in harmony, there is no need for justice. Other materials from the study such as Potato (lines 215–219) subscribe to the same understanding by laying emphasis on reactive approaches to conflict situations. On the other hand, other materials from the study show a broader understanding of peace and democracy education by connecting to justice. For example, in the quotation from the interview of Pumpkin below, she emphasizes that there is no no peace, if there is no justice as she says:

"I mean there is no peace if there is no justice for what is being done here in this particular country [...] so I think, one of the things is that we need to build the capacity of the church [...] a church that will build the capacity in justice and they can speak to power without fear of people [...] But again, another thing coming up that I am beginning to see, standing up for peace that we are not doing [...] is the issue of climate change and food security [...] seeing that most of our trees are being felled and so there is this invasion of the Saharan desert and so the farming lands are also being encroached by herdsmen and it is causing a lot of problems in the Middle Belt; water crises also [...] We cannot talk about justice and peace when we don't talk about sanitation, food security and climate."(Pumpkin, lines 335–369).

The statement of Pumpkin above emphasizes on the need for justice and to broader aspects that are linked to ecological and economic factors. The leaders of Church organizations therefore show divergent understand of peace and democracy education. In summary, the findings based on the understanding of Christian Church leaders in Nigeria reveal the following:

Peace club activities in schools contribute to positive change in students' life and learning experience. This understanding is limited to individual experience in the grassroots while the connection to a broader perspective is not perceived. The interviewed church leaders show varied understandings concerning learning conditions for peace and democracy education. On the one hand, there are perceptions that emphasizes safe learning conditions and the other hand, focus is on normative aspects of discipline such as corporal punishment and a call for morality. As far as the understanding of peace and democracy education is concerned, the Church leaders show a varied understanding and not all the ideas are adequate for global peace and democracy.

Discussion: Shaping Peace and democracy education: The role of church and faith-based schools

The results of this study are discussed focusing the argumentations on two aspects: Quality education as a foundation for peace and democracy and, churches as a global institution and their role in shaping peace and democracy education.

Quality education as a foundation for peace and democracy

Findings show that leaders of Church organizations show varied understanding regarding learning conditions for peace and democracy. While some of the leaders' percetions address inclusive and safe learning spaces, others emphasize normative forms of discipline. The discourse on

sustainable peace and democracy is rooted in quality education as it provides safe spaces of learning with emphasizes on good learning climate, critical thinking, problem solving and cooperative learning which have been identified by research as key elements of peace and democracy education (Dewey, 2024, p. XV; Burde et al., 2017, p. 620; Bajaj, 2015, p. 1–2; Krogull et al., 2014, pp. 17–48). The support and offer of quality and inclusive education to children in precarious areas of conflict and war may not be consider-ed an option but mandatory towards the reduction of inequal-ity gaps, serving as a contribution to social justice (Scheunpflug & Wenz, 2015). In the framework of peace and democracy, quality education can therefore be understood as a right (Pigozzi, 2009) with support argumentation on Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015). Ross and Gray (2006) further argue that it is by first achieving quality education that other rights can be practiced and fulfilled to assure sustainable peace and stable societies. From this backdrop, the underlying principles of peace and democracy education may not be treated in isolation, but rather as an integrated part of quality education (Moraes et al., 2023, p. 147–148; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2016, p. 265; Magro, 2015, p. 114).

Churches as a global institution and their role in shaping peace and democracy education

The results show that the understanding of the contribution of peace and democracy education is schools is limited to individual learning experiences in the grassroots of the local context. In addition, the of peace and democracy education understanding by leaders of Christian church organization is not adequate for global peace and democracy. However, the Christian church, based on its transnational character, has the potential of defining itself as a global institution to influence change both locally and worldwide as well as contribute to the protection of human dignity and creation (Gellel, 2013, p. 13). Above all, the role of the Church in sub-Saharan Africa gets stronger as people tend to trust and align themselves more with their church or religious group than with the state (Ilo, 2015). Even though the debate at international level arises as to whether church organizations and their leadership is contributing to enlightenment or fundamentalism (UNESCO, 2021, p. 1; Bader & Maussen, 2012), it is possible to emphasize on Christian faith as it can provide a strong basis for a shared understanding of humanity and thus dimensions of global peace and democracy. Furthermore, the Christian Church based on the Christian heritage is shaping inter-religious dialogue spaces for enhancing global social justice (Höllinger & Makula, 2021, p. 347–349; EKD, 2017; Miedema, 2016, p. 10). This has the potential to develop through education, thereby contributing to enhance more trust, human interconnectedness, justice and peace especially in fragmented societies, characterized by violent conflicts and weak forms of democracy (Waghid et al, 2018). However, there is the tendency to relate issues of globalisation by either focusing on macroscopic problems in contrast to local problems or ensuring developments through the pressure of culturally homogenizing forces over all others, which may be misleading in shaping the global society (Robertson, 1995, p. 25). In the face of such a situation, the role of the Christian church gets more compelling as it necessitates a response to religious plurality, tolerance, social justice and worldviews (Duignan, 2007, p. 11–12). Education for just peace and democracy in schools may not therefore be separated as isolated terms given that both have an overarching focus towards the development of the global society (Jäger, 2015; Magro, 2015, p. 109). This requires solidarity and collective social action to challenge policies that tend to harm the planet or discriminate against groups of people even if this goes against the positions of governments or international institutions (Bourn, 2024, p. 242). The Christian church as a global institution could therefore have the potential to shape peace and democracy education amidst its complexities.

Conclusion

This paper concludes on two perspectives based on the findings of the study. First, further professional development is needed for leaders of church organizations and faith-based schools on the global understanding of peace and democracy and how to contextualize this for better learning and wellbeing of children in a conflict situation. Secondly, qualitative research to deepen the perceptions of church leaders on the role of the church as a global institution and what this means for shaping peace and democracy education in faith-based schools is needed.

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Anmerkungen

1 The findings presented in this arcticle are based on data, which had been already reported (see Njobati 2021) and had been newly interpreted in the light of the research question on peace education and democracy learning of this article.

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