

## **Policy Document for Nigeria Ministry of Education, Education Boards, and Schools**

**Dissertation Research Conducted by:** Dr. Marlana Salmon-Letelier  
**University:** Teachers College, Columbia University in New York City, United States  
**Email:** msl2193@tc.columbia.edu

*This document provides a summary of the findings and recommendations from the full dissertation, which can be provided upon request. Questions should be directed via email (msl2193@tc.columbia.edu) and requests for further discussion to Marlana Salmon-Letelier, Ed.D.*

### ***Research Summary***

Schools have a position in society that could provide tools for students to move toward more positive intergroup relations and to shape their nation as desired. In this research, I present an analysis of how and whether schools in Nigeria, particularly unity schools (FUCs), achieve this. Schools are a concentrated site for interactions among young people, yet research in the field of education and conflict settings is limited in its exploration of *how* schools facilitate intergroup relations that deter hostility and increase intergroup tolerance while shaping positive and peaceful social relations. To address this gap, this project explores tolerance levels, national identities, and social interactions among students in Federal Unity Colleges (FUCs) in Nigeria.

This mixed methods longitudinal research was based on extensive fieldwork in 8 secondary schools (6 FUC and 2 State) over one academic year in Nigeria (2017-2018). The research includes a unique combination of methods: (a) pre- and post- student surveys including data on social (friendship) networks with 643 students, (b) pre- and post- interviews involving 47 students (group and individual), (c) 17 teacher and 8 administrator interviews, (d) 56 hours of classroom and school observations, and (e) an analysis of curriculum and policy documents.

### ***Main Findings***

- 1. The survey results show that in terms of intergroup tolerance, unity and state school students surprisingly demonstrate no difference.**
- 2. Friendship patterns vary between unity and state schools.** Unity school students tend to divide close friendships along religious lines while state school students do so along ethnic lines.
- 3. While unity schools have more opportunity for interethnic integration in comparison with state schools, they show increased opportunity for religious division** through the separation of religious spaces and religious events that occur during the more intimate “living together” of a unity school boarding set-up.
- 4. Neither the curriculum nor the teachers delve deeply enough or encourage critical thinking that is necessary** to teach students to challenge their thinking and move

forward in shifting current social relations (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; McLaren, 1995).

5. **The most important pattern that appeared in both the social network analysis and interview data indicates that the overlapping of being both Hausa and Muslim appears to be the ethno-religious group most separated and stigmatized within the schools.** This overlapping identity is of particular importance because of its association with current conflict (e.g., Boko Haram and the Fulani Herdsmen). Divisive social patterns are maintained amidst the illusion of unity alongside neglect to use the larger conflict and negative intergroup relations as an opportunity to have students learn from the conflict by critically considering ethnic and religious identities (of various combinations) and their connections to inequality and conflict over time.
6. When looking at the interview data, it became evident that in addition to an illusion of unity bolstered by a lack of critical thinking about the conflict and intergroup relations, **both religion and language—with language highly linked to ethnic identity in Nigeria— and the way they are facilitated in schools play significant roles in marking these established social boundaries.** Separate religious practices mark intergroup differences and encourage separate relationships among students particularly in unity schools, and language is used to mark social boundaries and hierarchies that exist in greater Nigeria (Blommaert, 2010; Risager, 2012). Both of these factors appear to contribute to the specific separation of Hausa Muslim students.
7. **The survey results suggest a difference in national identity between unity and state schools students—with unity school students showing a lower national identity as measured in the survey.** I argue that this lower national identity among unity school students is actually a different type of national identity from that shown by state school students. The national identity shown by unity school students appears to be less linked to an uncritical patriotism belonging to a particular ethnic group and more related to an incorporation of ethnic diversity into a higher category of national membership (see Turner et al., 1987). In other words, national identity developed in unity schools appears to be more inclusive of different ethnic groups.
8. **Interview data points to a difference in school community between unity and state schools—where students only come together on a daily basis and do not represent the diversity of Nigeria—as elucidating this difference in national identity between unity and state school students.** Through this school community, greatly enhanced by the boarding school design of the school, students engage in interactions and friendships that are less influenced by the outside conflict and intergroup tensions due to their physical separation from outside socializing factors. This combined with the informal interactions and living together in a diverse community that is physically separated from outside intergroup tensions gives students the space to renegotiate boundaries and elude stereotypes and negative social relations (Eleni Andreouli et al., 2014; Iqbal et al., 2017, p. 134; Sedano, 2012).

9. **Boarding schools have great potential for the reshaping of intergroup relations in areas of conflict and should be further utilized and explored.** However, simply removing students from the conflict in a boarding school bubble is not sufficient; schools must use this unique position to have students view the conflict, their identities, and one another from a different vantage point.

### *Recommendations*

Based on the findings, I recommend the following:

1. **The concept of school community should be more purposefully utilized and integrated within formal school practices and policy to shape and enhance the way diverse schools positively influence social relations.** School community and informal spaces are important for transforming social relations; yet these are not areas of focus for funding or evaluation and are rarely identified as specifically relevant to improving intergroup relations in schools. Funding should be directed into informal spaces and in encouraging school leaders, teachers, educational experts, staff, and students to work together in better facilitating a school community. Increasing school community should be identified as a goal at the national level, and this goal should be more specifically broken down according to the student population and characteristics of each school.

2. **The FUCs should purposefully use their unique position as boarding schools and space to help students analyze and work through the conflict in positive ways.** In this research we have seen that school community is enhanced by the boarding school design. Students are able to engage in interactions and friendships that are less influenced by the outside conflict and intergroup tensions due to their physical separation from outside socializing factors. This, in turn, can help break the cycle of negative intergroup relations, and, with proper implementation of other school practices and curriculum, can strengthen the reshaping of intergroup relations in a purposeful and positive manner. Boarding schools should more directly work with students to reshape social relations, negotiate a complex history, confront the challenges facing the nation today, and think about how to address conflict and social relations in the future. The boarding school bubble should be fully utilized by purposefully seizing the opportunity for students to explore the conflict from a new vantage point. Ways to do this are further expressed in the remaining implications.

3. **The way that students both divide and form friendships should be identified for each school and appropriate actions should be taken to increase positive intergroup integration and relations.** The way intergroup relations reflect negative intergroup patterns in larger society should be recognized and friendship patterns within schools should be assessed at the beginning and end of each year. This process should inform teachers and administrators; students, however, should be carefully involved in this process of understanding friendship networks as friendships should still form naturally among students without students feeling forced to say they have certain types of friends. Rather, school practices and curriculum should be reassessed using friendship pattern information to encourage school spaces, informal interactions, and curriculum that will

naturally reshape friendships to be more diverse across groups. Proper interventions to promote intergroup unity cannot be properly designed or sufficiently evaluated before taking the first step to understand the way groups are interacting within the school. Patterns of specific groups that are excluded should be identified (such as was the case with Hausa Muslims) and this should be addressed within the curriculum (such as through encouraging critical thinking), learning time (where students learn from/with/and teach one another – see number 4), school practices, and school design –and should not simply be addressed as a disciplinary action that is not supported at other levels and in other spaces/practices.

**4. Funding should go into expanding opportunities that have students learn from, learn with, and teach each other – particularly in terms of ethnicity, language, and religion.** This should apply to both the formal classroom/curriculum and in the informal settings such as dorms. In diverse schools where language and religious spaces, classes, and practices may be separated, students of different languages and religions should be further integrated in spaces that would allow them to learn from, learn with, and teach one another while still allowing them the time and space to practice their languages and religion as desired. School practices of language and religious separation—including separate language and religious education classes—should be redesigned to create a new mode of interethnic and interreligious interaction that taps into the deep knowledge of each of the students while encouraging curiosity, peace, understanding, and respect. This should be done, at least in part, in a structured setting with well-trained facilitators (Banks et al., 2001). Thus, appropriate training should also be provided for teachers and staff.

**5. Critical thinking around intergroup relations, group portrayal, conflict issues, history, and the nation-state should be heavily incorporated into school practices, curriculum, and teacher training.** This research shows evidence of lost opportunities in classrooms and curriculum to encourage the critical thinking and exploration that is necessary to have students recognize, challenge, and move forward in thinking about changing the status quo (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; McLaren, 1995). Paris' (2012) Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy encourages the simultaneous embracing and critiquing of identities and should be implemented within the school practices and curriculum. Students are able and ready to think critically about themselves and others with the proper guidance, and in this way, they can more deeply engage and understand the ethnic and religious identities of others and their relationship to them both in the context of history and present day conflict. However, to do this, administrators, teachers, staff, and education leaders, need to be trained and ready to engage students in challenging conversations and to appropriately manage the confrontation of social norms, status quo, and conflict within the classroom and school. Teacher training and evaluation should align with these goals, and teachers should have protection through the support of schools and the national education department (in the case of Nigeria, the Federal Ministry of Education) to teach topics—on which they should have special training—that may be difficult without fear of causing controversy with parents. These efforts should be communicated as an important goal of the school system to students, parents, and others

who might push back on efforts that will have students challenge existing social relations and the status quo.

**6. Goals—specifically those regarding intergroup relations—should be clarified and aligned within the policy, curriculum, school practices, and school design.** These goals should be set at all levels (including among students, staff, teachers, and administrators) and align with overarching goals set at the national level. The overarching goals of the school and educational policy should include a focus on identifying and communicating (a) the status quo, (b) aspects of the status quo that the nation/schools desire to shift, and (c) specific goals for changing those aspects. The way that society (i.e., the status quo) is reflected in schools should be identified within each school specifically, and steps should be taken to change desired aspects so as to align with overarching goals. The goals should be re-assessed and readjusted yearly. Goals that schools are struggling to achieve should be reassessed and broken down into smaller sub-goals. Goals should be specific, clear, identified for various levels (as already stated), and given a timeline. Appropriate goals should also be clearly communicated to the students; although it is important to distinguish which goals should be communicated—such as a goal clearly outlining the concept of unity—and those that should not—such as those that might cause students to strengthen social boundaries based on awareness of the goals.

**7. School practices intended to integrate students should be continuously evaluated for effectiveness and the ways in which they achieve and/or work against the goals.** As shown in this research, stated goals do not always align with implementation of school practices and curriculum in schools. Even practices and curriculum that are intended to integrate diverse groups of students do not always influence student relations in ways that align with the stated goals and may actually create negative experiences in some cases (see Bekerman, 2009; Carter, 2012; McLaren, 1995; Moore, 2006). To enhance the power of diverse schools in uniting groups of students, particularly in areas of current or historical conflict, these practices and curriculum should continuously be assessed for their influence on students and intergroup relations—including in the use of critical thinking about intergroup relations and the conflict, integration across religious and linguistic groups (in the case of FUCs), and the way that students engage in learning from, with, and about each other. It is important, however, that these evaluations do not become a source of fear for administrators, teachers, and staff, but rather they should be used as tools to inform them about their progress on goals that have been clearly set at the national and school level (see previous implication).

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