
DISCUSSING THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS STUDIES ON MORAL AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT AMONG STUDENTS IN BENUE STATE

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Abstract

Christian Religious Studies (CRS) is an essential component of Nigeria's educational curriculum, designed to instill moral discipline, ethical values, and spiritual awareness in students. In Benue State, which is predominantly Christian, CRS plays an even more central role in shaping the moral and ethical development of learners. The subject not only reflects the dominant religious orientation of the region but also provides a framework through which values such as honesty, respect, responsibility, and tolerance are taught and reinforced in schools. The paper discussed the role of CRS in molding the character of students in Benue State, highlighting its influence on their behavior, attitudes, and decision-making. It also examined the challenges associated with its teaching and learning, such as limited instructional materials, teacher capacity gaps, and students' varying levels of interest. To address these issues, the paper suggested the adoption of interactive and student-centered teaching strategies, regular capacity-building programs for teachers, incorporation of real-life moral case studies into CRS lessons, and stronger collaboration among schools, religious institutions, and families. The paper concluded that, given the socio-religious context of Benue State, CRS remains an indispensable tool for nurturing ethical, responsible, and socially conscious individuals. However, its effectiveness could be enhanced through curriculum review, policy support, and adequate provision of teaching resources. By strengthening the teaching and learning of CRS in Benue State, the subject would serve as a more effective instrument for moral development and societal transformation in Nigeria.

Keywords: Christian Religious Studies, moral development, ethical value, education, character formation

Introduction

Education is a powerful tool for shaping the moral and ethical values of students, equipping them with the knowledge and principles necessary for responsible citizenship. Christian Religious Studies (CRS) is an essential subject in Nigeria's educational curriculum, designed to instill moral discipline, spiritual awareness, and ethical values in students. By teaching biblical

principles, Christian doctrines, and moral lessons, CRS aims to develop individuals who exhibit integrity, honesty, and social responsibility. In Apa Local Government Area (LGA) of Benue State, where Christianity is widely practiced, CRS plays a significant role in the character formation of students. However, the extent to which CRS influences students' behavior, ethical decision-making, and academic performance remains a subject of debate. While some scholars argue that CRS is effective in shaping students' moral development, others question its impact in addressing modern ethical challenges, given the increasing moral decline in society. This study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of CRS among students in Apa LGA, assessing how well it promotes ethical awareness, influences students' attitudes and behavior, and contributes to their overall moral development.

Evaluating the effectiveness of CRS among students is crucial to understanding its impact on moral and ethical development. As society evolves and faces new moral dilemmas, it is essential to assess whether CRS is achieving its intended objectives in shaping students' character and behavior. Studying the effectiveness of CRS helps educators and policymakers identify areas for improvement in curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and student engagement. It provides insights into whether students internalize and apply the lessons learned in their daily lives, influencing their decision-making processes and ethical standards. Furthermore, an assessment of CRS effectiveness can reveal challenges hindering its impact, such as inadequate teacher training, lack of teaching materials, and students' attitudes toward religious education. Addressing these challenges can lead to enhanced instructional approaches, ensuring that CRS remains relevant and effective in promoting moral and ethical values.

Nigeria's National Policy in the Teaching and Learning of Christian Religious Studies

The inculcation of good values has been the objective of every educational curriculum. The curriculum for teaching and learning of CRS in Nigeria schools is no exception. In consonance with the need for CRS in schools, the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1981) states 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.

However, in Nigeria, religious education is considered to be fundamental to the achievement of national unity and development. This quotation from NPE, 1981 expressively place teaching and learning of CRS at the apex of the various discipline that make up the school curriculum. Scholars have expressed conviction that CRS is a sure way to inculcate the desire moral values and attitudes into Nigerian youths.

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Onubi (2011) explained that after an analysis, identification and selection of traditional Nigeria values in the sense of wide acceptability or broad agreement. Such values must be taught or imparted. The teaching of these values can be achieved via CRS. The contribution of CRS in school is unique. Even though other school subjects have their own contributions to make towards development of morals in school children, the contribution of CRS is unique. Thus, CRS can be studied like any other subjects like: history, Arts, Science and Mathematics etc. According to Fafunwa (1974) the core of CRS curriculum is the Bible. He continues to say Christian missionary whose primary aim was to convert Nigerians into Christianity and inculcate character training and development based on Christian principles introduced western education. Ilori (1992), presents four objectives for CRS in schools as follows:

1. Christian Religious objectives: This is set objectives aimed at bringing the learner to understand that Christian God as a faithful father who had dealt with people right through history and still dealt with people. This understanding should lead the learners to respond with personal faith in God.
2. Moral objectives are to present the ethical teaching of the scriptures as directives of God the father to guide the lives of learners and at the same time to make the learner see this as a frame work which ensure that they can live proper human life.
3. Social objectives could be summed up as the promotion of harmonious human relationship in school, in the family and civil Objective. Here Ilori sees the teaching and learning of CRS as an important element in helping the learners to grow up to be alert, responsible, tolerant, courageous and patriotic citizens of a democratic and diverse nation.
4. Academic objectives which have to do with the learning, memorizing and inwardly digesting a body of factual information from Jewish and Christian scripture. It means the preparation of the learner to acquire knowledge without any reference to the application of the knowledge acquired to daily living.

In the National Policy on Education (NPE) the teaching of CRS is explicitly implied as a discipline which can produce the desired character change in the nations' area of concern. Two main objectives in NPE (Revised 1981), suggest that the teaching of CRS is expected to:- Inculcate the right types of values and attitudes for survival of the Nigeria society and inculcate values of national conscientiousness and national unity.

The National Education Research and Development Council (NERDC, 1984), charged with the responsibility of drawing both objectives and curriculum for CRS states the following in their document: to enable youths accept Christ as personal saviour; to provide an opportunity for Nigerian youths to learn more about God and thereby to develop their faith in Him; to enable

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youths to recognize Jesus as founder and sustenance of the Christian churches; to help youths accept the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their daily activities; to help youths accept the basic teaching of Christ and apply these to their life and work; to develop in youths Christian attitude and moral values such as humility, respect, love, kindness, justice, fair-play, spirit of forgiveness, devotion to duty, orderliness in behaviour and selfless to God and humility; and to prepare youths for higher education for service within the community.

In the same view, Gbari (2016) deduced the teaching and learning of CRS to include: Moral and spiritual training; intellectual training; transmission of cultural values; acquisition of skills; rationality of man training; transmission of cultural values; acquisition of skills; rationality of man developing the rational mind; and the development of all round worthwhile attitudes or behaviours.

The Role of CRS in Moral and Ethical Development

According to Yusuf, T. (2019), CRS plays a vital role in shaping students' moral values by instilling ethical principles, fostering good character, and promoting responsible behavior. For instance, CRS teaches students fundamental moral values such as honesty, integrity, fairness, and respect for others. Biblical teachings, including the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, provide clear moral guidelines for daily living. Through stories like the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and Jesus' teachings on love (Mark 12:31), CRS encourages students to show kindness, empathy, and concern for the well-being of others, fostering a more compassionate society. Ajayi, (2020) maintained that CRS instills a sense of responsibility by emphasizing that actions have consequences. The parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) and the story of Joseph (Genesis 39-41) teach students about diligence, faithfulness, and accountability in their personal and social lives. Biblical teachings on forgiveness and reconciliation, such as Jesus' command to forgive seventy times seven times (Matthew 18:21-22), help students develop conflict-resolution skills, reducing aggression and promoting harmony in schools and communities.

CRS develops a sense of justice and fairness for instance, Prophet Amos' teachings on social justice (Amos 5:24) and Jesus' advocacy for the marginalized (Matthew 25:35-40) inspire students to fight against discrimination, corruption, and injustice in society. CRS helps students develop self-control and humility by teaching the value of patience and perseverance. The life of Job (Job 1-42) and Jesus' humility (Philippians 2:5-8) serve as examples of endurance and modesty. By studying biblical stories of faith, such as Abraham's trust in God (Genesis 22:1-18) and Daniel's courage (Daniel 6), students learn to remain hopeful and steadfast in their beliefs, even in challenging situations (Omotayo, 2015). The Bible teaches respect for parents, teachers,

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and leaders (Exodus 20:12; Romans 13:1). CRS helps students understand the importance of obedience, respect, and orderliness in society. CRS emphasizes the role of individuals in building a just and moral society. It teaches students to be law-abiding, to participate in community service, and to contribute positively to nation-building. CRS shapes the character of future leadership, for instance, Biblical figures like Moses, David, and Nehemiah demonstrate leadership qualities such as wisdom, courage, and service. CRS inspires students to become ethical and visionary leaders who prioritize the common good (Eze, 2021).

Another considerable prospect of religious education according to Jayeola (2005) is that it promotes morality not only in adults but also in children as well. Children right from youth are expected to be shown the way of the Lord so that they may worship and obey him throughout their days. It is believed by many people that children brought up in a religious way may hardly misbehave or involve themselves in things that are ungodly. The teaching of CRS enhances the level of discipline among the learners. When students are exposed to religious education, they will realize that to obey is better than sacrifice and there is reward for obedience and punishment for disobedience. The students will also know that they must be obedient to constituted authorities, to their parents and people who are older than they are (Balogun, 2017).

Teaching of CRS makes man to become more humane in dealing with his fellow beings. The reason for this is that of all subjects, it is religious studies that reminds man of his duties not only to his neighbours and God, but also to himself and his family. Thus, the teaching of religious education helps students to see themselves as children of the same family or parents. Therefore, whatever ways such Christians may see themselves, the problem of tribalism may not exist. Also, as members of the same family, the spirit of love will be existing among them regardless of where they may come from (Alao, 2019). CRS plays a crucial role in shaping students' academic performance by fostering moral discipline, critical thinking, and emotional stability. While CRS is primarily focused on spiritual and moral teachings, its impact extends to various aspects of a student's academic success. CRS teaches students self-discipline, a key factor in academic success. Biblical teachings emphasize the importance of diligence and perseverance, as seen in Proverbs 10:4, "Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth." This encourages students to be hardworking and stay committed to their studies (Johnson, 2022).

The study of CRS involves analyzing biblical texts, interpreting moral lessons, and applying them to real-life situations. This improves students' reasoning and problem-solving abilities, which are essential for subjects such as mathematics, science, and literature. Furthermore, CRS instills values such as honesty, integrity, and responsibility, which are crucial for academic success. Students who uphold these values are less likely to engage in examination malpractice, plagiarism, or other dishonest behaviors that can negatively affect their academic progress

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(Johnson, 2022). The Bible teaches that success comes through dedication and perseverance. Colossians 3:23 states, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord." This motivates students to remain committed to their studies and strive for excellence. Academic life can be stressful, but CRS teachings on faith, prayer, and trust in God help students develop emotional resilience. Philippians 4:6-7 encourages believers not to be anxious but to pray and find peace, reducing stress and anxiety that could affect academic performance (Ogunbiyi, 2016).

The study of biblical texts requires careful reading, comprehension, and interpretation, which help students improve their literacy skills. These skills are transferable to other subjects, enhancing overall academic performance. CRS encourages students to develop positive relationships, work in groups, and respect different opinions. These social skills improve classroom engagement, collaboration in group projects, and overall participation in academic activities. By studying the lives of biblical leaders such as Moses, David, and Jesus, students learn leadership and responsibility, which help them take initiative in school activities, group discussions, and extracurricular engagements (Okonkwo, 2023). CRS helps students develop a sense of purpose, guiding them to see their education as a means to fulfill their potential and contribute positively to society. This motivation can lead to greater commitment to academic excellence. CRS teaches that knowledge is a gift from God and should be pursued with a positive mindset. Proverbs 1:7 states, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." This encourages students to value learning and see education as an important part of their lives (Dzurgba 2002).

Challenges Facing the Teaching of CRS in Apa Local Government Area

According to Lawal (2003) many students perceive CRS as less relevant to their career aspirations, especially in a world that prioritizes STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) subjects. Additionally, the growing presence of social media and popular culture promotes secular values that sometimes conflict with religious teachings, further diminishing students' enthusiasm for CRS. Furthermore, globalization has introduced diverse belief systems, leading to a more pluralistic society where students may question traditional religious teachings. Peer influence also plays a role, as some students' view religious studies as outdated or unnecessary compared to other subjects. The perception that CRS lacks practical application in modern life contributes to its declining importance among students (Williams, 2020). Olubunmo (2001) maintained that, many schools, especially in rural areas, lack essential CRS teaching resources such as textbooks, workbooks, audio-visual aids, and digital learning materials. Without these resources, teachers struggle to make lessons engaging and interactive. In some cases, outdated materials are used, failing to address contemporary issues that could make

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religious education more relevant to students. The absence of modern teaching tools, such as projectors, online resources, and religious documentaries, further reduces students' interest and comprehension.

Fasoranti, (2018) said the none availability of well-trained and certified CRS teachers is another significant problem. Many schools employ teachers who lack specialized training in religious studies, leading to ineffective teaching methods. Some teachers are unable to relate biblical teachings to modern societal issues, making lessons feel abstract and irrelevant. Eze (2022) said lack of continuous professional development programs means that many CRS teachers do not stay updated with new teaching strategies and curriculum developments. Without proper resources and qualified teachers, students struggle to grasp key religious concepts, leading to a decline in interest and performance in CRS. This can also contribute to a weakening of moral and ethical values, as students do not receive proper guidance on discipline, honesty, and responsibility through religious education. Balogun (2019) said many governments, particularly in secular states, adopt educational policies that aim to balance religious diversity and prevent religious bias in schools.

As a result, CRS is often given limited attention in the curriculum, sometimes making it an elective rather than a core subject. In some cases, policies promote a general religious studies approach that combines multiple religious' beliefs, reducing the depth of Christian education. This can make it difficult for students who want a stronger foundation in Christian teachings (Akinola, 2020). Another challenge is the inadequate funding for CRS programs. Unlike science and technology subjects, which receive significant government investment, religious education often lacks sufficient resources, leading to poorly equipped classrooms and a shortage of qualified teachers (Omotayo, 2016).

The structure and content of CRS curricula in many educational systems also present challenges. For instance, some CRS curricula fail to address contemporary moral and ethical issues that students face in modern society, making the subject seem less relevant (Okonkwo, 2024). Also, the issue of limited time on the time table for instance, CRS is often given fewer hours in the school timetable compared to other subjects, limiting the depth of instruction (Ogunbiyi, 2017). The curriculum may not allow flexibility for teachers to adapt lessons to real-life situations or engage students in critical discussions about faith and morality. The overall effect is that; it leads to declining interest in CRS among students. When religious education is not prioritized, students may not fully understand its importance in shaping values such as honesty, discipline, and responsibility. Additionally, a rigid curriculum may fail to inspire meaningful discussions about faith, ethics, and real-world moral challenges (Okonkwo, 2024).

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Strategies for Improving the Effectiveness of Christian Religious Studies

According to Lierop (2020), the various methods that CRS teachers use during teaching help learners to understand the lesson and practice what they learn. The teaching methods and techniques take care of children differences. He goes ahead and says teaching methods are divided into four broad types. These are telling, showing, exchanging ideas and group planning activities. Use of the appropriate teaching methods makes learning interesting and focused (Evening, 2016). A teacher should select methods which make teaching learner-centered and that bring out positive behaviour change in the learner.

The teacher should also use creativity and innovativeness in order to help promote and sustain positive change (KIE, 2018). Groenewegen (2019) stressed that lecturing method requires little time to transmit information, however, it makes learners passive, sometimes to the extent of dozing, falling asleep or day dreaming without the teacher's notice. Lierop (2020), records that this method is more effective when it is supplemented by a question and answer session or followed by a group discussion. Lierop (2020), says that stories tend to draw people together in fellowship breaking any racial, tribal or even inter-school barriers.

Teachers are, therefore, encouraged to narrate stories that lead to character formation. CRS teachers should select methods which aim at making teaching learner-centred and help to bring about positive behaviour change (Kenya Institute of Education, KIE, 2006). One of such recommended methods is discussion. According to KIE (2006), this method gives the learners an opportunity to express their ideas in the topic being taught. This enhances the learner's participation and arouses their interest in the lesson. Chesaro (2021) complements that discussion in CRS leaves the teacher assured that the students are not only gaining academically, but are also molded spiritually and morally. However, according to Groenewegen (2019), many teachers do not use this method citing a reason that it breeds rowdiness, time wasting, disturbances, and excessive noise.

Use of song and dance is also a good CRS teaching method. According to Evening (2016), singing and dancing provided a most valuable opportunity of sharing and demonstrating values in communities. Some songs and dances carry deep messages which positively changes behaviour in the entire community. According to KIE, (2006) songs and dances are important elements in the teaching of CRE subjects, because they arouse attention, create interest in the lesson and help the learners to internalize the main ideas and values. Question and answer method cited by the KIE (2006) makes the mental growth of the learner encouraged. Lierop (2020) discerns that this method stimulates the mental growth of the learner and also encourages them to be active in searching for the truth. Kerry (2017), perceives that this method helps to

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create good relationship between the teacher and the learners. According to Maudho (2021), role play is widely supported by educationists since it encourages learners to work as a group thus promoting leadership skill. This method enables one to disclose his potential and to socialize with the others while learning to be independent. Lierop (2020) detects that this method offers an excellent means for the Christian educator to build moral and spiritual values in character formation. Role play provides an opportunity for cooperation, planning and judging, making moral and religious ideas more concrete and real.

The Project work method gives the learners an opportunity to apply life skills like creative thinking, critical thinking and decision making. These life skills are acquired in the process of learning and help the teacher assess the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes (KIE, 2010). Groenewegen, (2019) sees that, projects help students grasp what it means to be a loyal citizen or a committed Christian.

Conclusion

The study on the effectiveness of Christian Religious Studies (CRS) among students in Apa LGA of Benue State has highlighted the significant role of CRS in shaping students' moral values, academic performance, and overall behavior. Findings indicate that CRS positively influences students by promoting discipline, honesty, responsibility, and ethical decision-making. It helps in character formation, reduces negative behaviors such as examination malpractice, and enhances students' understanding of social and religious values.

However, challenges such as a lack of qualified CRS teachers, inadequate teaching materials, and declining student interest were identified as factors affecting the full impact of CRS. Addressing these challenges through improved curriculum implementation, teacher training, and increased community involvement can enhance the effectiveness of CRS in promoting moral and academic excellence. CRS remains a valuable subject in fostering moral development and positive societal values among students in Apa LGA. To maximize its effectiveness, educational stakeholders must ensure that CRS is taught effectively, with practical applications that reflect contemporary societal needs.

Suggestions

Based on the findings of the study on the effectiveness of Christian Religious Studies (CRS) among students in Apa LGA of Benue State, the following suggestions are made:

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1. **Enhance Teacher Training and Recruitment:** The government and education authorities should employ more qualified CRS teachers and provide regular training programs to improve teaching effectiveness.
2. **Improve CRS Curriculum and Teaching Methods:** The CRS curriculum should be made more interactive and practical by incorporating real-life applications, discussions, and community engagement to increase students' interest.
3. **Provide Adequate Teaching Materials and Resources:** Schools should be equipped with textbooks, digital resources, and teaching aids to enhance the delivery of CRS lessons.
4. **Increase Awareness on the Importance of CRS:** Parents, teachers, and religious leaders should work together to encourage students to take CRS seriously as a subject that contributes to their moral and academic development.
5. **Integrate CRS with Moral and Civic Education:** Schools should integrate CRS with civic education programs to reinforce values such as honesty, discipline, and responsibility in students.

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