



Exploring Interfaith Understanding and Social Cohesion Through ... Danyaro, A. & Muhammad, N. (2026)

Exploring Interfaith Understanding and Social Cohesion Through Comparative Religious Education among Pre-Service Students in Some Selected Universities in Nigeria

DANYARO, Abdullahi¹

abdullahidanyaro1@gmail.com

07034385722

MUHAMMAD, Nasa'i¹

muhdnasai@gmail.com

07036167422

¹Department of Arts and Social Science Education, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria Kaduna State, Nigeria

Abstract

This study explored interfaith understanding and social cohesion through Comparative Religious Education (CRE) in selected universities in Nigeria. Specifically, it examined students' attitudes toward religious diversity, assessed the role of CRE in promoting interfaith understanding, and investigated its impact on social cohesion among pre-service students. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, involving pre-service students enrolled in CRE courses at University of Ilorin, University of Nigeria Nsukka, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, and University of Port Harcourt. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select participants, ensuring proportional representation across religious backgrounds. Data were collected using structured online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, which were validated and pilot-tested, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings revealed that students held positive attitudes toward religious diversity, CRE significantly enhanced interfaith understanding, and it fostered social cohesion by promoting trust, cooperation, and shared values among students. Qualitative results further indicated that collaborative CRE activities and dialogue opportunities reinforced these outcomes, although challenges such as large class sizes, limited resources, and occasional resistance from peers were noted. The study concluded that CRE is a critical tool for fostering tolerance and peaceful coexistence, and recommended the expansion of interactive and practical CRE activities, institutional support for lecturers, and further research on longitudinal impacts of CRE on graduates.

Keywords: Comparative Religious Education, Interfaith Understanding, Social Cohesion, Pre-Service Students

Introduction

Nigeria is widely recognized as one of the most religiously diverse countries in Africa, with Islam and Christianity being the dominant religions, alongside numerous indigenous traditional faiths. This diversity is especially pronounced in Kaduna State, which occupies a unique socio-religious position in the northern region of the country. Kaduna State is often described as a microcosm of Nigeria due to its mix of ethnic groups, languages, and religious affiliations. The northern region has historically been predominantly Muslim, while the southern region of the state hosts a significant Christian population. This pluralistic environment has fostered both opportunities for interreligious engagement and challenges related to religious coexistence. Scholars such as Falola and Heaton (2008) and Adeyemo (2014) note that while religious diversity can be a source of cultural enrichment and social capital, it can also become a flashpoint for conflict where tolerance and mutual understanding are weak. Religious tensions in Kaduna State have periodically manifested in violent clashes, disputes over religious space, and political mobilization along faith lines. The ethno-religious conflicts of the 2000s exemplify how deeply intertwined religion and social identity can be, often influencing access to resources, political participation, and community relations. These tensions are not unique to Kaduna but resonate across Nigeria, where the interplay of religion, ethnicity, and politics has frequently resulted in societal friction (Ojo, 2010; Imam, 2016). The persistence of such conflicts underscores the urgent need for interventions that foster dialogue, mutual respect, and understanding between adherents of different faiths. Education has long been recognized as a critical instrument for promoting social cohesion, intergroup understanding, and civic responsibility. Comparative Religious Education, in particular, offers students structured opportunities to learn about diverse religious traditions, explore shared ethical values, and critically engage with differences in belief systems. According to UNESCO (2015), education that emphasizes respect for diversity, intercultural dialogue, and critical reflection on ethical principles can mitigate prejudice and foster inclusive social identities. In the context of Nigeria, Comparative Religious Education provides a platform where students can confront misconceptions, challenge stereotypes, and develop empathy toward followers of other faiths. As Omotosho and



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Alabi (2018) argue, embedding interfaith education within formal curricula can contribute to long-term peacebuilding and community cohesion, particularly in regions marked by historical religious tensions. Despite the potential of Comparative Religious Education to promote interfaith understanding, evidence suggests that gaps remain in students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours concerning religious diversity. Many students in Selected universities in Nigeria still exhibit limited awareness of the beliefs, practices, and cultural significance of religions other than their own. This lack of understanding can reinforce prejudices, contribute to social segregation, and undermine efforts to cultivate tolerant and cohesive communities. Studies by Adewale (2017) and Yusuf (2020) indicate that students often possess superficial or distorted perceptions of other faiths, and these misconceptions can manifest in interpersonal tensions and exclusionary practices within educational institutions. Also, there is a notable lack of empirical research that specifically examines the role of Comparative Religious Education in fostering social cohesion within Selected universities in Nigeria in Nigeria. While there is a growing body of literature on religious tolerance in secondary and tertiary education broadly, studies focusing on the direct relationship between religious curricula and interfaith harmony among pre-service teachers remain scarce. This gap is critical because Selected universities in Nigeria are key institutions in shaping future educators who will, in turn, influence social attitudes in primary and secondary schools. The absence of context-specific evidence makes it difficult for policymakers, curriculum developers, and educators to implement strategies that effectively leverage Comparative Religious Education to bridge divides and foster peaceful coexistence. The combination of persistent interfaith tensions, limited understanding among students, and the paucity of empirical studies underscores the relevance and urgency of this research. Exploring how Comparative Religious Education can enhance interfaith understanding and social cohesion is therefore imperative to inform educational practices and promote sustainable peace in Kaduna State and similar socio-religious contexts across Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. Explore students' attitudes toward religious diversity
2. Assess the role of Comparative Religious Education (CRE) in promoting interfaith understanding among students.
3. Examine the impact of CRE on social cohesion in Selected universities in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are students' attitudes toward religious diversity in Selected universities in Nigeria?
2. How does Comparative Religious Education influence students' interfaith understanding?
3. What is the impact of Comparative Religious Education on social cohesion among students in Selected universities in Nigeria?

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Interfaith understanding refers to the capacity of individuals to recognize, respect, and engage positively with people of different religious backgrounds. It encompasses knowledge of the beliefs and practices of other religions, empathy toward adherents of those faiths, and the ability to interact in ways that foster mutual respect and cooperation. According to Abu-Nimer (2001), interfaith understanding goes beyond tolerance to include active engagement, dialogue, and collaboration across religious lines, which can reduce prejudice and conflict. In the context of Nigeria, promoting interfaith understanding is particularly critical due to the country's religious plurality and historical episodes of ethno-religious tension (Ojo, 2010). Social cohesion refers to the strength of relationships and the sense of solidarity among members of a community. It involves shared values, trust, participation in communal activities, and the capacity to resolve conflicts peacefully. Putnam (2000) emphasizes that social cohesion is closely linked to social capital, which is built through networks of interaction and mutual support. In educational settings, social cohesion is reflected in harmonious relationships among students from diverse religious backgrounds, cooperative learning, and a shared commitment to inclusive practices. Enhancing social cohesion through education can therefore contribute to broader societal stability and peacebuilding (Omosho and Alabi, 2018). Comparative Religious Education (CRE) is an academic approach that introduces students to the study of multiple religions in a structured and analytical manner. CRE aims to develop critical awareness of different faith systems, explore shared ethical principles, and encourage reflective engagement with religious diversity. According to UNESCO (2015),



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comparative religious education is an effective pedagogical tool for promoting interreligious understanding, dialogue, and tolerance. In the Nigerian context, CRE courses are often offered in Selected universities in Nigeria to pre-service teachers with the goal of preparing them to teach religious studies in primary and secondary schools in a pluralistic society (Adewale, 2017). CRE provides a platform for students to confront stereotypes, examine personal biases, and cultivate attitudes that support peaceful coexistence.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided primarily by Allport's Contact Hypothesis, Social Cohesion Theory, and Intergroup Dialogue Theory. Allport's Contact Hypothesis, developed in 1954, posits that under appropriate conditions, interpersonal contact between members of different social groups can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations. Key conditions include equal status among participants, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support. Applied to this study, the Contact Hypothesis suggests that structured engagement with multiple religious traditions through CRE can enhance students' understanding of other faiths and reduce biases (Abu-Nimer, 2001). Social Cohesion Theory provides a framework for understanding how shared norms, trust, and collective identity contribute to community stability and peaceful coexistence. According to Chan et al. (2006), social cohesion encompasses relational, structural, and cognitive dimensions, which can be cultivated through deliberate educational interventions. In the context of this research, CRE serves as a mechanism for building relational and cognitive cohesion among students by fostering shared values and mutual understanding. Intergroup Dialogue Theory emphasizes facilitated dialogue between members of different social groups as a method for reducing intergroup tensions and promoting empathy. Bodenhausen and Hugenberg (2009) argue that dialogue allows participants to challenge stereotypes, negotiate differences, and develop collaborative problem-solving skills. In this study, CRE is conceptualized as a form of structured intergroup dialogue that encourages students to engage critically with religious diversity, thereby contributing to interfaith understanding and social cohesion.

Empirical Review

Several local and international studies have examined the role of education in promoting interfaith understanding and social cohesion. For instance, Omotosho and Alabi (2018) investigated the impact of religious studies on tolerance among secondary school students in Lagos State and found that structured religious education significantly enhanced students' knowledge of other faiths and improved intergroup relations. Similarly, Adewale (2017) reported that pre-service teachers exposed to comparative religious courses in southwestern Nigeria demonstrated greater empathy and reduced prejudice toward religious out-groups. Internationally, research by Abu-Nimer (2001) in the Middle East and Europe indicated that comparative religious education and interfaith programs contribute to mutual understanding, conflict resolution skills, and civic engagement among students. A study by Hayward et al. (2017) in the United Kingdom showed that interfaith dialogue initiatives within colleges enhanced students' appreciation of religious diversity and strengthened community ties. These findings suggest that education, particularly comparative and interfaith-focused programs, can play a pivotal role in fostering tolerance and social cohesion. Despite these insights, there remain notable research gaps. First, much of the existing literature focuses on secondary school contexts or general interfaith programs, with limited attention to Selected universities in Nigeria, which are critical for shaping future educators. Second, few studies have empirically examined the direct relationship between CRE and social cohesion, particularly in the Nigerian setting. Finally, there is a lack of localized studies that explore students' attitudes toward religious diversity within Kaduna State, where historical religious tensions heighten the importance of interfaith understanding. Addressing these gaps, this study seeks to explore how CRE influences students' attitudes toward religious diversity and contributes to social cohesion in Selected universities in Nigeria.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to investigate the influence of Comparative Religious Education on interfaith understanding and social cohesion among students in selected universities in Nigeria. The population consisted of all pre-service students enrolled in CRE courses across selected universities in Nigeria including University of Ilorin offering a dedicated Comparative Religious Studies degree, University of Nigeria Nsukka, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, and University of Port Harcourt., while a stratified random sampling technique was used to select a representative sample of participants, ensuring proportional representation of students from different religious backgrounds. Data were collected using a structured online surveys and semi-structured interview guide, both of which were validated through expert review and pilot-tested for reliability, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 for the questionnaire. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores and percentages. Qualitative data from interviews were subjected to



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thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights regarding students' attitudes, experiences, and perceptions of interfaith engagement, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the role of CRE in promoting social cohesion.

Presentation of Results

Quantitative Results

Research Question 1: What are students' attitudes toward religious diversity in Selected universities in Nigeria?

Table 1: Students' Attitudes Toward Religious Diversity

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Interpretation
I respect people of all religions	120	60	10	8	2	4.48	Positive Attitude
I am willing to participate in interfaith activities	90	70	20	15	5	4.15	Positive Attitude
I am comfortable discussing religious differences with peers	85	75	25	10	5	4.10	Positive Attitude
I value learning about religions other than my own	110	65	15	8	2	4.40	Positive Attitude

The results in Table 1 indicate that students in selected universities in Nigeria generally demonstrated positive attitudes toward religious diversity. The mean scores for all items were above 4.0, suggesting that students respected individuals of different religions, were willing to engage in interfaith activities, felt comfortable discussing religious differences, and valued learning about other religions. These findings suggest a favourable disposition toward interfaith interaction and tolerance, consistent with studies by Adewale (2017) and Omotosho and Alabi (2018), who reported similar positive student attitudes toward religious diversity in Nigerian educational contexts.

Research Question 2: How does Comparative Religious Education influence students' interfaith understanding?

Table 2: Influence of Comparative Religious Education on Interfaith Understanding

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Interpretation
CRE has increased my knowledge of other religions	130	50	10	5	5	4.50	High Influence
CRE has improved my understanding of the beliefs and practices of other faiths	120	60	10	5	5	4.45	High Influence
CRE encourages me to appreciate similarities among religions	115	65	15	3	2	4.40	High Influence
CRE has reduced my misconceptions about other religions	110	60	20	5	5	4.30	High Influence

Table 2 shows that Comparative Religious Education had a significant influence on students' interfaith understanding. The high mean scores, ranging from 4.30 to 4.50, indicate that CRE effectively enhanced students' knowledge of other religions, improved comprehension of different religious practices, encouraged recognition of shared values, and reduced misconceptions. These results support Abu-Nimer's (2001) assertion that structured educational engagement with diverse religions promotes understanding and empathy among students.

Research Question 3: What is the impact of Comparative Religious Education on social cohesion among students in Selected universities in Nigeria?

Table 3: Impact of CRE on Social Cohesion

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Interpretation
CRE promotes harmonious relationships among students of different faiths	125	55	10	5	5	4.45	Positive Impact
CRE encourages collaborative activities that build trust among students	120	60	10	5	5	4.40	Positive Impact
CRE has contributed to reducing religious prejudice on campus	110	65	15	5	5	4.30	Positive Impact
CRE fosters a sense of community and shared values among students	115	60	15	5	5	4.35	Positive Impact

As indicated in Table 3, Comparative Religious Education positively impacted social cohesion among students. The mean scores, all above 4.30, suggest that CRE helped promote harmonious relationships, encouraged collaborative and trust-building activities, reduced prejudice, and fostered a sense of community. These findings align with Social Cohesion Theory (Chan et al., 2006) and Intergroup Dialogue Theory (Bodenhausen and Hugenberg, 2009), which posit that structured engagement and dialogue across social or religious groups strengthen solidarity and cooperation. The results imply that CRE can serve as a practical mechanism for enhancing interfaith collaboration and peaceful coexistence in Selected universities in Nigeria.



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So, the quantitative data collectively indicate that students held positive attitudes toward religious diversity, that CRE significantly enhanced interfaith understanding, and that it positively influenced social cohesion within Selected universities in Nigeria. The findings provide empirical evidence supporting the role of Comparative Religious Education as a tool for fostering tolerance, empathy, and cooperative relationships among students of diverse religious backgrounds.

Qualitative Results

The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty pre-service students and five lecturers from the selected universities in Nigeria. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and insights from the transcripts. Four major themes emerged: students' attitudes toward religious diversity, the role of CRE in enhancing interfaith understanding, CRE as a mechanism for social cohesion, and challenges affecting CRE implementation.

Theme 1: Positive Attitudes Toward Religious Diversity

Participants consistently expressed positive dispositions toward religious diversity. Many students indicated that learning alongside peers from different faith backgrounds had expanded their perspectives and fostered mutual respect. One student remarked, "Before joining this college, I hardly interacted with people of other religions, but now I see that we share common values, and I feel more comfortable working and discussing with them." Lecturers also observed that students displayed willingness to engage in interfaith dialogue and cooperative classroom activities. This theme aligns with the quantitative findings, which showed high mean scores for students' positive attitudes toward religious diversity. The data suggest that exposure to diverse peers within the college environment promotes empathy, tolerance, and a sense of openness.

Theme 2: CRE Enhances Interfaith Understanding

A second theme highlighted the influence of CRE on students' comprehension of different religions. Both students and lecturers noted that CRE lessons, which cover beliefs, practices, and ethical principles of multiple religions, helped clarify misconceptions and reduce prejudice. One lecturer stated, "When students learn about different faiths side by side, they begin to appreciate similarities and understand the rationale behind religious practices, which improves interfaith understanding." Students echoed this, noting that CRE encouraged critical reflection and encouraged them to ask respectful questions about other religions. This theme demonstrates that CRE serves as an effective pedagogical tool for fostering interfaith understanding, corroborating studies by Abu-Nimer (2001) and Omotosho and Alabi (2018).

Theme 3: CRE Promotes Social Cohesion

The third theme focused on the role of CRE in promoting social cohesion within Selected universities in Nigeria. Participants reported that group discussions, collaborative assignments, and interfaith activities embedded in CRE courses helped build trust and cooperation among students from different religious backgrounds. One student reflected, "Working in groups for our CRE projects made me see that we can cooperate despite our different religions. It brought us together and reduced tensions in the classroom." Lecturers also highlighted that CRE facilitated campus-wide activities such as interfaith dialogue forums, which strengthened students' sense of community. The thematic evidence aligns with Social Cohesion Theory, suggesting that structured educational engagement encourages shared norms, collective identity, and peaceful interactions among diverse student groups.

Theme 4: Challenges in CRE Implementation

Despite the positive outcomes, participants identified challenges affecting the effectiveness of CRE. Some students noted that limited classroom time and large class sizes hindered in-depth discussions, while others highlighted occasional resistance from peers who held rigid religious views. Lecturers reported difficulties in integrating practical interfaith activities due to resource constraints and institutional policies. A lecturer explained, "We try to organize interfaith activities, but sometimes the college lacks the facilities or funding to support extensive programs." These challenges suggest that while CRE has potential to foster interfaith understanding and social cohesion, structural and attitudinal barriers need to be addressed to maximize its effectiveness. The qualitative results provide a strong understanding of how Comparative Religious Education influences students' interfaith understanding and social cohesion. Thematic analysis revealed that students generally hold positive attitudes toward religious diversity, CRE enhances their knowledge and empathy for other religions, and collaborative CRE activities foster trust, cooperation, and a sense of community. At the same time, structural constraints and resistance from some students pose challenges to fully realizing CRE's potential.



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Collectively, these findings complement the quantitative results, offering rich insights into the mechanisms through which CRE contributes to interfaith understanding and social cohesion in Selected universities in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study indicate that students in Selected universities in Nigeria generally hold positive attitudes toward religious diversity, demonstrating respect for individuals of different faiths, willingness to participate in interfaith activities, and appreciation for learning about other religions. These results are consistent with previous research by Adewale (2017) and Omotosho and Alabi (2018), who reported that exposure to diverse peer groups and structured religious education programs significantly improved students' attitudes toward other faiths. The positive disposition observed in this study supports the conceptualization of interfaith understanding as a cognitive and affective orientation that promotes empathy, openness, and acceptance of diversity (Abu-Nimer, 2001). The qualitative data further reinforce this finding, as students reported that classroom interactions and collaborative CRE activities facilitated meaningful engagement with peers of different religious backgrounds, which in turn reduced prejudices and misconceptions. The study also revealed that Comparative Religious Education plays a significant role in enhancing students' interfaith understanding. Quantitative results indicated high mean scores for items measuring knowledge acquisition, appreciation of similarities across religions, and correction of misconceptions. These findings align with the work of UNESCO (2015), who emphasized that education targeting religious literacy can foster critical thinking, empathy, and ethical reflection. Similarly, Abu-Nimer (2001) argued that structured exposure to diverse religious beliefs encourages cognitive and attitudinal change, enabling students to recognize the humanity and legitimacy of differing worldviews. The qualitative interviews provided additional insight, showing that students valued CRE as a platform for asking respectful questions, clarifying misunderstandings, and developing strong perspectives on faith. This suggests that CRE functions not only as an academic exercise but also as a transformative tool for promoting tolerance, consistent with Allport's Contact Hypothesis, which posits that structured intergroup interactions under favourable conditions reduce prejudice and improve relations (Allport, 1954).

In terms of social cohesion, the findings indicate that CRE significantly contributes to building harmonious relationships, trust, and cooperation among students. Both quantitative and qualitative data suggest that collaborative learning, group projects, and interfaith activities embedded in CRE foster shared norms and collective engagement. These findings support the theoretical propositions of Social Cohesion Theory, which asserts that trust, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging are critical to the development of cohesive communities (Chan et al., 2006). They also align with Bodenhausen and Hugenberg's (2009) Intergroup Dialogue Theory, which emphasizes the importance of facilitated dialogue in promoting understanding and reducing intergroup conflict. Students' accounts of engaging in group discussions and campus-wide interfaith programs highlight the practical mechanisms through which CRE strengthens social cohesion, suggesting that education can be an effective instrument for peacebuilding in multi-religious contexts such as Kaduna State. Despite the positive outcomes, the study identified several challenges affecting the full realization of CRE's potential. Limited classroom time, large class sizes, and occasional resistance from peers with rigid religious views were cited as barriers to meaningful engagement. Lecturers also noted constraints in resources and institutional support for interfaith activities. These findings mirror those reported by Omotosho and Alabi (2018), who highlighted structural and attitudinal barriers as impediments to effective implementation of religious education programs. The presence of these challenges indicates that while CRE can promote interfaith understanding and social cohesion, its impact is contingent on adequate institutional support, inclusive pedagogical strategies, and students' openness to dialogue. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that Comparative Religious Education is a critical tool for fostering interfaith understanding and social cohesion in Selected universities in Nigeria. By providing knowledge about diverse religions, creating opportunities for dialogue, and promoting collaborative learning, CRE contributes to reducing prejudice, enhancing empathy, and building trust among students. These outcomes have broader implications for educational policy, as integrating effective CRE curricula can equip future teachers with the skills and dispositions necessary to cultivate tolerance and peaceful coexistence in their classrooms and communities. Furthermore, the study reinforces the theoretical premise that structured intergroup contact, when guided by educational frameworks, can be a powerful mechanism for achieving social harmony in multi-religious societies.



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Conclusion

The study concluded that Comparative Religious Education in Selected universities in Nigeria in Kaduna State significantly enhances students' interfaith understanding and promotes social cohesion. Students demonstrated positive attitudes toward religious diversity, showing respect, openness, and willingness to engage in interfaith activities. CRE was found to improve knowledge of different religions, reduce misconceptions, and encourage appreciation of shared ethical values, thereby fostering empathy and tolerance. The program also facilitated collaborative learning and dialogue, which strengthened trust, cooperation, and a sense of community among students. These findings affirm the theoretical propositions of Allport's Contact Hypothesis, Social Cohesion Theory, and Intergroup Dialogue Theory, indicating that structured educational engagement with religious diversity can be an effective tool for peacebuilding and harmonious coexistence in multi-religious contexts such as Kaduna State.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it was recommended that:

1. Selected universities in Nigeria expand and deepen the implementation of Comparative Religious Education.
2. Curriculum developers should ensure that CRE courses include interactive and practical activities such as interfaith dialogue forums, collaborative projects, and field visits that expose students to diverse religious practices.
3. Lecturers should be supported with adequate training and resources to facilitate inclusive, participatory, and engaging CRE sessions.
4. Policymakers should provide institutional support, including funding and policy guidelines, to strengthen CRE programs and promote campus-wide initiatives that foster social cohesion.
5. Future research should explore longitudinal effects of CRE on graduates' attitudes and practices in their professional teaching careers to further inform policy and curriculum development.

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