

Preventing Youth Radical Ideologies through Peace Education in Conflict-Prone Areas in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the role peace education can play in preventing youth radical ideologies in conflict-prone parts of Rivers State, Nigeria. Against a backdrop of economic deprivation, ethnic tension, and political exclusion, young people in the region are increasingly exposed to ideological shifts that can tip into violent extremism. The study looks at how present, accessible, and effective existing peace education programs actually are, and what impact they have on youth attitudes toward violence, conflict, and diversity. Social Identity Theory and Transformative Learning Theory frame the analysis, offering a way to understand how peace education builds critical thinking, tolerance, and civic responsibility. Using a mixed-methods design, data were drawn from interviews, focus group discussions, and document review involving educators, policymakers, and young people. The findings show that peace education initiatives do exist, driven mainly by NGOs and community organizations, but their reach is constrained by weak institutional integration, limited funding, and an urban bias. Where these programs have been implemented, though, they show real promise in reshaping youth mindsets and reducing susceptibility to radical influence. The study recommends folding peace education into the formal curriculum, expanding community-based interventions, and pairing peace education with youth economic empowerment as a route to sustainable peace building in the region.

Keywords: Youths, Extremism, Radical Ideologies, Vulnerability, Conflict, Peace Education.

1. Introduction

Young people represent one of the most powerful forces for change a society has, but in conflict-prone regions that potential is routinely undercut by exposure to violence, marginalization, and ideological manipulation. In Nigeria, where socio-economic inequality, ethnic tension, and political instability persist, youth are increasingly vulnerable to the kind of ideological drift that leads toward radicalization and violent extremism (Ugwueze, 2020). This drift rarely appears out of nowhere; it tends to grow out of long-term structural violence, unemployment, poor education, and thin civic engagement, conditions that give extremist ideologies room to take hold, particularly in areas like the Northeast and the Niger Delta, where the state's presence is weak and grievance narratives run strong.

Heading off this kind of ideological drift takes more than punitive or military responses. It calls for proactive, educational strategies that address the roots of discontent and give young people other paths to identity, purpose, and belonging, and peace education is one of the more effective tools available for that purpose. It builds tolerance, empathy, critical thinking, and nonviolence, all of which matter for youth living in fragile, conflict-affected settings (Harris & Morrison, 2012), and it equips them to analyse conflict, understand different perspectives, and reject violence as a form of social or political expression.

Organizations such as UNESCO (2017) and UNICEF have pushed globally for peace education to be built into school curricula and community programs as a way of countering youth

radicalization. Nigeria has made some progress here through non-formal platforms and civil society initiatives, but a systemic, institutionalized approach is still largely missing. This paper argues that peace education, properly implemented, can work as a preventive mechanism against ideological shifts among youth, by building inclusive values, social resilience, and a culture of peace in conflict-prone regions.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Youth radicalization and violent extremism have become serious security and development challenges in Nigeria, particularly in areas marked by socio-economic deprivation, political marginalization, and ethnic tension (Agbiboa, 2013; Okoli & Orinya, 2020). In Rivers State and similar conflict-prone areas, young people carry a disproportionate share of unemployment, limited educational opportunity, and social exclusion, all of which raise their vulnerability to radical ideologies (Akinola, 2017). Environments like these create fertile recruitment ground for violent groups, as youth look for identity, purpose, and socio-political agency, sometimes through extremist networks (Onuoha, 2014).

Peace education is widely seen as one way to reduce these risks, through its capacity to build critical thinking, tolerance, and civic responsibility (Fayemi, 2016). By fostering understanding of diversity, nonviolent conflict resolution, and social cohesion, it can reduce susceptibility to extremist narratives and offer young people alternative frameworks for engaging with their society (Okeke, 2018). In Nigeria, though, peace education remains poorly institutionalized and hard to access. Most programs run on a small scale through NGOs and community initiatives, leaving much of the at-risk youth population unreached (Akinola, 2017; Okoli & Orinya, 2020).

Weak integration into the formal curriculum, insufficiently trained educators, and thin policy frameworks compound the problem (Fayemi, 2016; Okeke, 2018), and there is a visible urban bias in programming, rural and marginalized communities are often left out despite facing heavier exposure to conflict and radicalizing influence (Onuoha, 2014). Taken together, the limited scope, coverage, and institutional backing for peace education undercut its effectiveness at preventing youth radicalization in conflict-prone areas.

That gap matters. Without peace education initiatives that are strategically designed and widely accessible, youth in vulnerable communities stay exposed to extremist ideologies, which feeds ongoing cycles of violence, insecurity, and underdevelopment. Addressing it matters not only for peacebuilding in Rivers State but for national stability more broadly, given how closely radicalization, social cohesion, and sustainable development are tied together.

In much of conflict-prone Nigeria, the Northeast and parts of the Niger Delta especially, young people remain susceptible to ideological manipulation and recruitment into violent extremist groups, driven by a mix of poverty, unemployment, political exclusion, and weak educational systems. Traditional security responses have not addressed these root causes, and in some cases have deepened mistrust between communities and the state (Ugwueze, 2020). Peace education is globally recognized as a preventive tool against extremism, but its implementation in Nigeria remains fragmented, underfunded, and largely absent from the areas most affected by conflict. A significant number of young people are therefore growing up without access to the kind of values-based education that builds critical thinking, empathy, and peaceful coexistence. Left unaddressed, this ideological drift toward violence threatens national stability, social cohesion, and sustainable development, which is why this study investigates how peace education might be strategically deployed to prevent youth ideological shifts in Nigeria's conflict-affected regions.

1.2. Aims and Objectives

This study aims to explore the role of peace education in preventing youth radical ideologies in conflict-prone areas of Rivers State, Nigeria, with an emphasis on promoting tolerance, nonviolence, and social cohesion. The specific objectives are to:

- Investigate the key drivers of youth ideological shifts and susceptibility to extremism in Rivers State.
- Identify the different types of youth radical ideology present in Rivers State.
- Examine the impact of peace education on youth attitudes toward violence, conflict, and diversity.
- Identify the institutional and socio-political challenges hindering the integration of peace education in

Rivers State.

Recommend strategic approaches for strengthening peace education as a tool for long-term peace building and youth empowerment in the region.

2. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative design aimed at generating in-depth insight into the role peace education plays in preventing youth ideological shifts in conflict-prone areas of Rivers State. This included reviewing policy documents, NGO reports, and academic literature on peace education and youth radicalization in Nigeria, in order to contextualize the findings and identify gaps. Thematic analysis was used to draw out recurring patterns from the qualitative data.

2.1. Theoretical Foundation

2.1.1. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), explains how people derive a sense of self and belonging from the social groups they belong to, ethnicity, religion, community. Under SIT, people sort themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups, which shapes identity and, in turn, attitudes and behaviour. When a group's identity feels threatened or diminished, individuals often respond by strengthening in-group loyalty, which can tip into prejudice, discrimination, or conflict with out-groups.

The theory matters here because youth in conflict-prone areas like Rivers State routinely experience social division along ethnic, religious, or political lines. These divisions can push ideological shifts as young people search for identity, acceptance, and empowerment through exclusive or extremist group affiliation, SIT helps explain why radical ideologies appeal: they offer a strong sense of belonging and purpose amid social fragmentation.

Peace education can work against this by building inclusive social identities that cut across narrow group boundaries. Through activities that foster intergroup dialogue, cooperation, and empathy, it encourages youth to recognize shared human values over exclusive loyalties, reducing intergroup mistrust and weakening the pull of violent ideology.

2.1.2. Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) looks at how adults revise their frames of reference, deeply held beliefs, assumptions, worldviews, through critical reflection and dialogue, a process that can produce a genuine shift toward more inclusive, open, and peaceful ways of thinking and acting.

Applied here, many youth in conflict-prone areas like Rivers State hold rigid or extremist beliefs shaped by their environment and experience. Transformative Learning Theory suggests that peace education can prompt them to critically examine those beliefs. Facilitated reflection and genuine dialogue encourage them to reconsider the assumptions that feed intolerance, violence, or exclusion, and by building critical thinking and self-awareness, peace education opens space for youth to shift from radical or violent mindsets toward peaceful, empathetic, constructive ones. That shift is essential for preventing ideological movement toward extremism and building sustainable peace in Rivers State.

3. Conceptual Clarification

3.1. Youth

Youth marks the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, defined by physical, psychological, social, and economic development. What counts as 'youth' varies by culture, law, and institution, but it generally refers to people no longer children yet not fully recognized as adults. The African Youth Charter (2006) sets the range at 15 to 35 years.

Several characteristics recur across contexts: high energy, creativity, and adaptability; heightened exposure to socio-economic and political challenges such as unemployment and marginalization; vulnerability to ideological manipulation in fragile environments; and real potential as agents of peace building, innovation, and social transformation.

For this study, youth is the developmental period in which individuals begin exercising independent judgment while remaining socially and structurally unformed.

In conflict-prone areas like Rivers State, this demographic is both strategic and vulnerable. Many young people are directly or indirectly affected by economic hardship, political exclusion, and environmental degradation, conditions that can make them susceptible to radical ideology or instrumentalization in violent movements. Positively engaged, though, through peace building, skills development, and inclusive governance, youth can become powerful drivers of sustainable peace.

3.2. Radical Ideologies

Radical ideologies are belief systems seeking sweeping, often abrupt transformation of social, political, economic, or religious structures. They reject moderate reform in favour of drastic change, and become dangerous where they justify violence, exclusion, or extremism (Horgan, 2009; Neumann, 2013).

In developing contexts like Nigeria, radical ideology tends to thrive where socio-economic deprivation, political marginalization, and identity-based grievance are already present. Young people are especially vulnerable to recruitment into radical groups through unemployment, limited education, social injustice, or religious manipulation (Onuoha, 2014; Olojo, 2013).

Boko Haram, for instance, has used a radical Islamic ideology to justify violent insurgency, exploiting religious sentiment and youth frustration in Nigeria's northeast (Onuoha, 2014). In the Niger Delta, youth militias have similarly used ethnic and environmental justice narratives to justify armed struggle (Arowosegbe, 2009). The common thread is a mix of socio-economic deprivation, political marginalization, identity crisis, and exposure to violent narrative, all of which, this study argues, peace education is well positioned to counter.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Peace Education as a Preventive Tool to Youth Radical Ideologies

Peace education is widely recognized as an effective way to counter youth radicalization, largely through building critical thinking, empathy, and nonviolent conflict resolution (Harris & Morrison, 2012). It gives youth the tools to critically examine extremist narratives and builds social cohesion by encouraging respect for diversity and human rights (UNESCO, 2017), and it can be delivered through formal school curricula, community workshops, or informal youth programs adapted to local needs and cultural context (Bar-Tal, 2004).

The evidence backs this up. Research in Northern Nigeria found that peace education programs helped youth build alternative identities that resist violent extremism and increased their engagement in constructive social activity (Ibrahim & Mohammed, 2021). In post-conflict Sierra Leone and Bosnia, similarly, peace education has contributed to healing division and building reconciliation among previously antagonistic youth groups (Jalloh, 2017; Bennet, 2010).

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) helps explain why youth are drawn to radical ideology in the first place, as a search for belonging and positive identity in a fragmented society; peace education pushes back by promoting inclusive social categories and intergroup understanding. Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) adds that peace education can prompt the deep reflection and worldview shift needed to reject extremist belief in the first place.

That said, peace education faces real obstacles: weak political will, limited resources, and cultural resistance, particularly in conflict-affected regions (Nwankwo, 2018). Fragmented NGO-led implementation with little coordination often undermines sustainability (Obi, 2020), and there is a shortage of localized research on peace education models tailored to specific contexts like Rivers State, where ethnic tension and youth unemployment remain high.

4.1.1. The Preventive Role of Peace Education

Peace education addresses these root causes by building social cohesion and resilience against extremist influence. It promotes intergroup dialogue, giving youth from different ethnic backgrounds a chance to interact, share experience, and build mutual understanding (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), reducing prejudice and pushing back on 'us versus them' narratives that fuel conflict.

It also uses transformative learning approaches (Mezirow, 1991), encouraging the kind of critical self-reflection that lets youth question entrenched beliefs and assumptions, including those that justify violence, cognitive shifts that matter for rejecting radical ideology in favour of peaceful

alternatives.

And it strengthens youth agency directly, through conflict resolution skills, human rights awareness, and democratic participation, young people who are empowered this way are more likely to contribute positively to their communities and resist recruitment into violent groups.

4.2. The Key Drivers of Youth Ideological Shifts and Susceptibility to Extremism

Rivers State, part of the Niger Delta, has faced recurrent conflict tied to ethnic tension, resource control disputes, and political marginalization, all of which shape how vulnerable its youth population is to radicalism and extremism. Understanding these drivers matters for designing effective interventions.

4.2.1. Economic Deprivation and Unemployment

High youth unemployment and pervasive poverty are primary drivers of ideological shift. Akinola (2018) finds that economic hardship fuels frustration and alienation, giving extremist groups an opening to recruit through financial incentive or a sense of purpose. Despite abundant oil resources, wealth distribution across Rivers State remains unequal, leaving many young people marginalized and desperate (Ebegbulem & Isumonah, 2016).

4.2.2. Political Exclusion and Marginalization

Youth in Rivers State often lack meaningful participation in governance and decision-making, producing feelings of powerlessness and disenfranchisement that extremist ideologies exploit by presenting violent resistance as a way to reclaim agency (Obi, 2020). Marginalization along ethnic and communal lines intensifies identity politics, which extremist groups then manipulate to deepen division.

4.2.3. Ethnic and Communal Conflicts

The state's complex ethnic mosaic has produced persistent tension. Youth frequently inherit communal grievances that get manipulated to fuel inter-ethnic distrust and violence (Ebegbulem & Isumonah, 2016), and radical groups capitalize on these divisions by framing conflict in ideological terms, drawing in youth who want to defend or advance their group's interests.

4.2.4. Lack of Quality Education and Exposure

Limited access to quality education narrows youths' critical thinking and exposure to different perspectives, leaving them more susceptible to extremist propaganda and less equipped to critically examine divisive ideology (Nwankwo, 2018). Educational disruption caused by conflict compounds this.

4.2.5. Psychosocial Factors and Identity Crises

Many youth in conflict zones carry trauma, loss, and identity confusion. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that in these contexts, youth may adopt radical ideology as a way to find belonging, purpose, and recognition, needs that extremist groups exploit by offering collective identity and meaning.

4.2.6. Influence of Radical Networks and Social Media

Social media and digital platforms have accelerated the spread of extremist narrative. Youth in Rivers State increasingly encounter online content that glorifies violence or promotes exclusionary ideology (Akinola, 2018), and these virtual networks often layer global extremist discourse on top of local grievance.

Key Driver	Description	Impact on Youth
Economic Deprivation & Unemployment	High poverty and lack of jobs fuelling frustration	Makes youth vulnerable to recruitment
Political Exclusion & Marginalization	Lack of participation in governance	Leads to feelings of powerlessness
Ethnic and Communal Conflicts	Longstanding inter-ethnic tensions	Fuels identity-based radicalization
Lack of Quality Education	Limited critical thinking and	Increases susceptibility to

	exposure	extremist propaganda
Psychosocial Factors & Identity Crisis	Trauma and search for belonging	Drives youth toward radical group identities
Influence of Radical Networks & Social Media	Online spread of extremist content	Amplifies radical messaging and recruitment

Summary Table of Key Drivers

4.3. Types of Youth Radical Ideology

4.3.1. Militancy/Resource Control Ideology

Belief in armed struggle to demand control of oil resources and compensation for environmental damage, exemplified by former Niger Delta militant groups such as MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta), driven by marginalization, poverty, and environmental injustice.

4.3.2. Cultism and Secret Societies

Youth joining violent cult groups for power, identity, protection, or political use, groups such as Icelanders, Greenlanders, Deygbam, and Deywell, usually motivated by peer pressure, unemployment, or recruitment by political actors.

4.3.3. Political Thuggery/Violent Partisanship

Radical youth aligning with politicians to intimidate voters, snatch ballot boxes, or enforce loyalty, in exchange for money, employment, or political power.

4.3.4. Ethno-tribal Extremism

Ideology built on ethnic superiority or resentment toward rival groups, usually tied to land disputes, political dominance, or resource allocation.

4.3.5. Cyber-activism/Radical Online Agitation

Tech-savvy youth using digital platforms to push aggressive political or social change narratives, driven by frustration, activism, or resistance to perceived injustice.

The prevalence of these ideologies among youth in Rivers State traces back to several interlinked factors. High unemployment breeds frustration and hopelessness that extremist groups exploit for recruitment (Akinola, 2018); ethno-political conflict, often rooted in competition over resource control and political power, deepens social fragmentation (Ebegbulem & Isumonah, 2016); and limited access to quality education and social services narrows young people's exposure to alternative worldviews and peaceful conflict resolution strategies.

Together, these factors create a cycle: disillusioned youth become vulnerable to radical narratives offering identity, purpose, and sometimes material incentive, and the resulting adoption of radical ideology tends to increase violence, further destabilizing communities and hampering development.

4.4. Impact of Peace Education on Youth Attitudes toward Violence, Conflict, and Diversity

Where it is effectively implemented, peace education has a genuinely transformative effect on youth attitudes and behaviour. In conflict-affected settings like Rivers State, where young people often grow up amid communal tension, political violence, and ethnic division, it can reshape how they perceive and respond to conflict.

4.4.1. Attitudes toward Violence

Peace education reduces the acceptance and justification of violence by teaching nonviolent conflict resolution techniques such as dialogue and negotiation, promoting emotional regulation and empathy that reduces aggressive reactions, and encouraging the critical thinking that lets youth challenge violent ideology. Programs run in Port Harcourt and Ogoni communities show participants becoming less likely to support violence as a response to grievance (Obi, 2020; Ibrahim & Mohammed, 2021).

4.4.2. Perception of Conflict

Peace education also changes how youth understand conflict itself, reframing it as a normal

part of society that can be resolved constructively, teaching about root causes such as inequality or identity-based exclusion, and emphasizing mediation, listening, and compromise. Youth exposed to this framing become more inclined to seek peaceful solutions and to act as mediators in their communities rather than agitators.

4.4.3. Attitudes toward Diversity

Peace education builds tolerance, respect, and inclusion by challenging stereotypes, promoting intergroup dialogue, encouraging appreciation for cultural, ethnic, and religious difference, and teaching the value of cooperation and coexistence. In Rivers State, where ethnic identity and political loyalty often fuel conflict, peace education has been shown to increase openness and reduce hostility across diverse youth groups (Nwankwo, 2018).

4.5. Institutional and Socio-Political Challenges Hindering the Integration of Peace Education

4.5.1. Institutional Challenges

4.5.1.1. Lack of Policy Framework

No clearly defined state policy or mandate integrates peace education into the formal education system, which limits government commitment and budgetary support.

4.5.1.2. Curriculum Gaps

The current school curriculum lacks comprehensive peace education modules; existing subjects such as civic education touch on related themes only briefly, without depth or practical application.

4.5.1.3. Inadequate Teacher Training

Most teachers are not trained in peace education methodology, which limits their ability to deliver peace-related content effectively.

4.5.1.4. Limited Funding and Resources

Peace education programs remain largely donor-driven and lack consistent state funding, leaving infrastructure, materials, and facilitators inadequate or unavailable.

4.5.1.5. Poor Coordination among Stakeholders

NGOs, ministries, and community-based organizations often work in silos, producing duplication, inconsistent messaging, and inefficiency.

4.5.2. Socio-Political Challenges

4.5.2.1. Political Interference and Instability

Politicization of education and youth programs undermines long-term planning; political actors sometimes discourage programs seen as empowering youth to challenge the status quo.

4.5.2.2. Ethnic and Communal Divisions

Rivers State's ethnic diversity, combined with local conflict between communities, can hinder collaboration and acceptance of peace initiatives across divides.

4.5.2.3. Mistrust in Institutions

Many communities distrust government-led initiatives given a history of neglect or marginalization, making them less receptive to peace education, particularly where it is perceived as externally imposed.

4.5.2.4. Youth Disengagement and Disillusionment

High unemployment, poverty, and exposure to violence leave many youth disillusioned and hard to engage; some see peace education as irrelevant or unrealistic.

4.5.2.5. Security Concerns

Ongoing insecurity in some communities discourages program implementation or participation by educators and learners alike.

5. Recommendations

5.1. Integrate Peace Education into School Curricula

The Rivers State Ministry of Education should build peace education into the school curriculum as a core subject or course at every level, primary, secondary, and tertiary, to instil tolerance, nonviolence, empathy, and respect for diversity in young people.

5.2. Community-Based Peace Initiatives

Local governments and NGOs should support grassroots peace clubs, youth forums, and interfaith dialogues that actively engage youth around nonviolence, identity, and coexistence, alongside media literacy programming.

5.3. Address Root Causes of Youth Radicalization

Government and stakeholders need to tackle the socio-economic drivers, unemployment, marginalization, political manipulation, limited access to quality education, that leave youth vulnerable to radical ideology in the first place.

5.4. Engage Religious and Traditional Leaders

These community figures should be mobilized as peace advocates, countering radical messaging with culturally grounded teaching on tolerance and mutual respect.

5.5. Youth Empowerment Programs

Policy support paired with skill acquisition, vocational training, and mentorship can give young people meaningful alternatives to violent groups or extremist movements.

5.6. Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

Establish tools to regularly assess how peace education initiatives affect youth behaviour, community cohesion, and conflict reduction in the region.

5.7. Collaborative Research and Partnerships

Encourage partnerships between universities, civil society, and international agencies to sustain research and share best practice on peace education and youth deradicalization strategies.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that peace education plays a vital role in countering youth radicalization and building long-term peace in conflict-prone areas of Rivers State. With youth unemployment, identity-based marginalization, and exposure to extremist ideology all on the rise, young people remain vulnerable to recruitment into violent movements, but peace education, properly designed and delivered, can shift youth perspectives toward nonviolence, tolerance, and constructive engagement.

By building critical thinking skills, conflict resolution techniques, and an appreciation for diversity, peace education addresses both the symptoms and root causes of radicalization. Existing community-based and NGO-led efforts show this, but their limited reach, inconsistent funding, and lack of integration into formal education reduce their overall impact.

For peace education to become an effective, sustainable tool for youth empowerment and peace building, it needs to be institutionalized through school curricula, backed by robust government policy, and paired with real economic and social opportunity for young people. That requires strategic collaboration among educators, policymakers, community leaders, and development partners, working to scale and sustain peace education across the state.

Ultimately, investing in peace education is both a preventive measure and a transformative one, capable of helping rebuild fractured communities and empower a new generation committed to peace.

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