

PRAYER IN SCHOOLS – LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE PERSPECTIVES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *The study is concerned with the administrative and legal perceptive of prayer in Nigeria public schools. 780 school administrators were randomly selected from the public schools in the 3 geo-political regions in the Southern Nigeria. A 20 item questionnaire was designed by the researcher. This was validated by experts in test and evaluation as well as seasoned school administrators in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The instrument was further tested for reliability using the test-re-test method. The data collected was analysed using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient statistics and it was established as 0.82 which shows that the instrument is reliable. The researcher and other research assistants personally administered the questionnaire and the data analysed using the mean and the t-test analysis. From the result and findings, it was observed that most school administrators do not see prayer as a normal school routine but do not have proper knowledge on the legality of enforcing prayer in schools. To the administrators, prayers is for character molding, entertainment and an instrument to instill discipline but the legal perspective is that it must not be forced on the child and must be conducted in line with the fundamental human rights of the child as enshrined in Section 33 – 44 of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.*

KEYWORDS: Prayer, School, Administration, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is culturally pluralistic. There are three forms of religions which has remained very dominant in the lives of the people – Christianity, Islam and the African traditional religion. The Christian religion is predominant in the Southern Nigeria as a result of the spread by the missionaries who came into the country through the coastal regions and the Islamic religion is predominant in the north with its spread from the Arab nations. The traditional African religion is the indigenous religion of the people before the coming of both the Christian and Muslim religions.

Consequently, religion plays a vital role in the lives of the average Nigerian child. Adebisi (2011) noted that it is the instrument for moral up-bringing in schools. Although, in Nigeria, many schools were initially owned by the missionaries before the take-over of schools by the colonial government in 1882 (Adebisi, 2011). During this period, the church cannot be divorced from the school. In fact, most schools were headed by religious leaders. Rev. Ranome Kuti was the first president of the Nigerian.....of Teachers supported by other notable clergies like Bishop A Kale, Rev. J.O. Lucas, etc who were all teachers. Schools during the missionary period were controlled by the church. So, the tradition of the church was to a reasonable extent extended to the schools. The teachers were made to be very active in church activities and they were disciplined in line with the religious precepts. The pupils

who were taught by these teachers were also “forced” to accept the new faith. In the Northern Nigeria, the story is also similar.

The children were made to learn and recite the Koran at very tender ages and to accept the religion as a way of life. They also established Koranic schools and most children were made to learn the Koran under the tutorship of an “Imam” – teacher. So, prayers formed part of the school routine.

In the past, prayers and scripture reading were common in most schools. In fact, it was required by law in most states (Ayo, 2011) the Nigeria schools in most southern Nigeria as part of the school routine will often have the morning and afternoon devotions where students are made to read scriptures, sing praises and pray. In the Islamic schools, in the northern Nigeria, the students are also made to recite the Koran during school devotions.

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic state with varied religious beliefs. Most children from the southern Nigeria often attend schools in the Northern Nigeria and most Northern children are found in the south. There are Northerners who are Christians and there are quite a number of southerners who are Muslims. Most parents bring up their children in line with their religious beliefs. There could be conflict of interest concerning the place of prayer in schools.

From the administrative perspective, prayers in school are regarded as a school routine which every child in school must abide with. A normal school in Nigeria often resume with the morning devotion. The morning devotion to a school administrator is a period where the students are assembled, a period where vital information or announcement are made, a period where the teachers could check the cleanliness of the child, a period where talents can also be discovered among the children and also a period where the children can know their teachers. To most school administrators, morning devotion is not necessarily a worship service but mere entertainment (Adebisi, 2011). Administratively, the morning or afternoon devotion is thought to be a good ground for moral instruction apart from the spiritual attachment. Scriptures are read and lessons are learnt from them. This will go a long way to help the school administrator to breed disciplined citizens. (Ajibowu, 2011).

To the school administrator, prayer in school is seen as an avenue to calm down the nerves of the children emotionally. During the period of examinations, children are made to pray and they are taught moral lessons about cheating and stealing. This to a reasonable extent will make the child to be emotionally composed to take the challenges ahead believing that God or the supreme being will see him through.

Critics cautioned that scripture reading should not be taught exclusively from a religious perspective and should not be used to promote the religious faith (Hutton, 2009). On the 30th of November, 2015, the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Education, in Cross River State – Mrs. Odey Anne in a statement directed all private and public Primary and Secondary Schools in the state to stop morning and afternoon devotion forthwith. The governor of the states as well as other religious organizations promptly reacted to this directive and stated unequivocally that:

“The directive to suspend morning devotion will negatively affect the moral up-brining of our children who are the future

leaders of the country” (Pulse, 30, 10 – 2015).

Apart from the fact that the permanent secretary was suspended, the state approved 10 minutes for compulsory devotion.

The place of the law concerning prayer in schools is very clear. The constitution of the federal Republic of Nigeria clearly stated in Sections 32-44 of the 1999 Constitution that:

“Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion including freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance – A person is not entitled to form, take part in the activity or be a member of a secret society”

In as much as prayer is a normal school routine, it may interfere with the religious belief of others. The United States Department of Education developed the following guidelines:

- Teachers and administrators in public schools should not advocate any religion.
- Public schools should not interfere with or intrude on a student's religious beliefs.
- Public schools may teach about the history of religion, comparative religions, the Bible as literature and the role of religion in the history of the country, U.S Department of Education, 1999).

The law frowned against making scripture reading and prayer a compulsory rite that must be observed (Alrightman School District V Scheme, 1963) in a supreme court in New York (Engle V Vitale, 1962). It was held that neither schools nor teachers can officially encourage student prayer. Prayer is permissible, however, when students initiated it and when it does not interfere with other students or the following of the school (Underwood and Web, 2006). It is legally wrong for a school to force students into a religious worship.

Sorenson (2007) noted that the law forbids the official use of religious symbols in schools. He noted that students may be Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, or members of other religions, imposing a particular form of prayer or religion on children in school can both be illegal and unethical, because it can exclude children on the basis of religion.

Although, the courts have been clear about denying prayers as a regular part of schools opening ceremonies. The issue of prayer at graduation and other school activities is less clear. Adebisi (2015) noted that there should be a clear separation of the church and the state in Nigeria, most religious organizations view a salute to the national flag, as a religious rite and their religion forbid them to bow before any other god. Most school children have suffered in the hands of school administrators as they view this act as act of insubordination and disrespect to the nation.

In most Nigeria schools, there are mandatory moments of silence in schools. Critics view this as a veiled attempt to institute a minute of prayer but the school

administrators view this moment of silence as a period designed to help students relax and reflect on the day ahead. Children caught not observing this moment of silence are often punished but the stand of the law and common sense is:

- Is there a secular purpose to the practice?
- Is the primary effect to advance or inhibit religion?
- Does the practice avoid excessive government entanglement in issues of religion?

If the reasons are secular, the laws are allowed to stand, if religions intents are involved, then the laws are ruled unconditionally. The school administrator may view the moment of silence as purely an administrative strategy to reduce play and keep the students in a relaxed mood for the next lesson. Legally, if it has religious connotations, it may be seriously objected by most parents.

Organized prayer in school is illegal from the standpoint of the law but it may be legal for extracurricular religious clubs (Morrison, 2010). The Ministry of Education in Nigeria shows no objection concerning allowing religious and philosophical organizations to be formed in schools. The law does not prohibit prayer in schools. Students can legally pray in school, but neither school officials nor teachers can lead or sanction organized prayer in schools.

In Nigeria, most parents do not only show serious objection to prayers outside their faith, they equally condemn any reading material that may indoctrinate the minds of their children and tend to affect their mode of worship at home. Ayomide (2003) stated categorically that when schools can show learning materials have a clear purpose such as exposing students to time-honoured literature, parental objections are usually overridden.

Statement of the Problem

The place of prayers in schools is very controversial. Many view it as a religious obligations, others look at it as an instrument for moral lessons, most parents and critics consider it as a means of indoctrination which may conflict with their faith. The school is expected to be a place for teaching and learning, the role of prayers remains an administrative and legal problem to the school administrator.

Purpose of the Study

The study is intended to find out:

- The administrative perspective of prayer in schools
- The legal perspective of prayer in schools
- If there is any significant difference between the administrative and the legal perceptive of prayer in schools

Research Question/Hypotheses

The study is guided by the following research questions and hypotheses.

- What is the administrative perceptive of prayer in schools?
- What is the legal perspective of prayer in schools?

Hypotheses

- There is no significant difference between the administrative and legal perceptive of prayer in schools.

METHODS

The design of this study is a descriptive survey. All the primary and secondary school administrators in the three geo-political zones in Nigeria formed the population of the study. 780 school administrators were randomly selected from primary and secondary schools in Ondo state (South West), Anambra State (South East), Bayelsa State (South – South). The stratified proportional sampling method and the simple random sampling technique was used in selecting the respondents. A questionnaire titled “The Administrative and Legal Perspective of Prayer in Schools (ALPP)” was used in collecting data from the respondents. The instrument contained two sections – section A sought information concerning the personnel data of the respondents, while the section B contained 20 items on the administrative and legal perspectives of prayers in schools.

The questionnaire was appropriately validated by experts in test and evaluation as well as seasoned school administration. The instrument was further subjected to a reliability test using the test-re-test method and the data collected from the 20 respondents were analysed using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. It was established at 0.83 which shows that the instrument is reliable. The questionnaire was personally administered by the researcher and other research assistants. The data collected was analysed using the mean and the t-test statistical analysis.

RESULT/FINDINGS

Research question One: What is the administrative perspective of prayer in schools.

This research question was answered with items 1 – 5 in the questionnaire.

Table 1: Administrative Perspective of Prayer in Schools

S/N	Items	\bar{X}	Decision
1	Prayers are normal school routine	1.04	Rejected
2	Prayers in school help in molding the morals of the pupils	3.21	Accepted
3	Prayers in schools make school devotion very interesting	2.74	Accepted
4	Organized prayers in school is supported by all parents and this enhance school – community relationship	1.02	Rejected
5	Moment of silence in the school is connected to prayers not relaxation and reflection	1.11	Rejected

The table shows that the mean average of 1.04 of the total responses believe that prayer is not a normal school routine. A mean score of 3.21 of the total responses however, agreed that prayer in schools help in molding the morals of the pupils. 2.74 average mean of the total responses by the 780 respondents accepted the fact that prayer in schools make school devotion very interesting. The mean of 1.02 of the total responses rejected the view that organized prayer in schools is supported by parents and so it does not encourage good school – community relations. The moment of silence in school is not connected to prayers as 1.11 average mean rejected the view.

Table 2: Research Question Two: What is the legal perspective of prayer in schools?

Items 5 – 10 answered the research question.

Table II: Legal Perspective of Prayer in Schools

S/N	Items	\bar{X}	Decision
6	Organized prayer by the school is legal and so students must be forced to attend prayer sessions	3.10	Accepted
7	Organized prayers by the students as extracurricular activity must be discouraged	2.83	Accepted
8	Prayers during morning devotion is legal and so must be enforced	3.48	Accepted
9	Prayers and religions symbols can be used officially used schools	2.77	Accepted
10	The mandatory moments of silence in schools must be used for prayers	1.03	Rejected

The table shows the perception of school administrators concerning prayer in schools. A mean of 2.5 believe that organized prayers by the school is legal and so must be enforced by school administrator. 2.83 mean of the total response also believed the organized prayers by the students as extracurricular activity must not be discouraged. 3.48 mean score are of the opinion that prayer during morning devotion is legal and so must be encouraged and enforced. 2.77 mean score of responses also accepted the fact that prayers and religious symbols can be officially used in schools. However, 1.03 mean average rejected the fact that the mandatory moments of silence in schools should be used for prayers.

Hypotheses One

There is no significant difference between the administrative and legal perspective of prayer in schools. This research hypotheses was tested using items 1 – 20 in the questionnaire.

Table III: T-test Analysis of Administrative and legal perspective of Prayer in Schools

Variables	N	S	\bar{X}	t-cal	t-crit
Administrative	780	11.73	6.01		
				1.23	1.96
Legal	780	9.32	3.02		

* Sig. at 0.05

The table shows that the calculated t-value of 1.23 is far less than the critical t-value of 1.96 which shows that there is a significant difference in the administrative and legal perspective of prayers in schools.

Discussion of Findings

Administratively, the school administrator value prayers not as a normal school routine but they believe that organized prayers by the school should be considered as legal and must be enforced. The rule of the law is quite different to this view. Morrison (2000) stated that organized prayers in school is illegal the legal standpoint is that the law does not prohibit prayer in schools, but neither school officials nor teachers can lead.

Since Nigeria is multi-ethnic with varied religions belief, children are not to be forced into any religion by the guise of prayer or scripture, readings in schools. It is optionally to the child as supported by sections, 33 – 44 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria undermining the faith that school administrators believe that prayers in school enhance moral discipline and makes morning devotion quite interesting. The legal standpoint is that the school must ensure that their activities do not conflict with the fundamental human rights of the child, so the child cannot be forced to pray when it is contrary to his conscience and religion.

The official use of religious symbols by most schools as perceived by most school administrators as normal is against the rule of law in Nigeria (Vide, Sec. 40 Nigeria Constitution). Official religious symbols are permitted in churches not schools. This could lead to indoctrination (Adebisi, 2011).

There is a significant difference between the administrative and legal perceptives of prayer in schools as perceived by school administrators. While most school administrators believe that prayer is necessary for molding children's character and therefore become better disciplined citizens, the standpoint of the law is that it must be a choice to be made by the child and not forced.

CONCLUSION

In Nigeria, prayer is considered as an essential aspect of human life. In schools, most school administrators especially those who attended missionary schools enforced prayer in schools without considering the standpoint of the law. In as much that the law is not against prayers in school, it must not be seen as an instrument of indoctrination by the parents who may hold an opposing view. Prayers must not be strictly enforced by the school administrator to the extent that children are suspended or punished for not obeying organized prayer sessions.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that school administrators should be better equipped with the knowledge of the law to enable them deal with certain sensitive issues in the day to day administration of the school.

Prayers are necessary in schools but must be conducted in line with the dictates of the law and the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Schools must not conduct themselves in such a way that their activities especially organized prayers will be at variance with the public or parents belief. There should be a mutual understanding between the community and the school.

School administrators may encourage students to form religious groups with little or no interference by the school. Schools should not be transformed to churches or as instrument to propagate a particular religion or denomination.

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