



The Role of History Education in Promoting National Identity and Citizenship Values

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Abstract

This paper explores the pivotal role of history education in fostering national identity and citizenship values in a pluralistic society. History education serves as a bridge connecting past events with present realities, enabling learners to understand the shared experiences, struggles, and achievements that shape a nation's identity. It cultivates a sense of belonging, patriotism, and respect for national symbols and institutions. Furthermore, through critical engagement with historical narratives, students develop civic competencies such as tolerance, democratic participation, and social responsibility. In a multicultural context like Nigeria, history education also contributes to national integration by promoting intergroup understanding and dispelling ethnocentric biases. However, the marginalization of history in school curricula has weakened its impact. The study recommends the revitalization of history education as a core component of national development, emphasizing inclusive narratives, critical thinking, and active citizenship. By embedding history education in both formal and informal learning systems, nations can strengthen civic identity, social cohesion, and democratic culture.

Keywords: History Education, National Identity, Citizenship Values.

Review Article

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1.0 Introduction/Background of the Study

In an era marked by increasing political polarization, cultural fragmentation, and civic disengagement, the role of history education in nation-building and character formation has become more critical than ever. Across the globe and particularly in post-colonial societies such as Nigeria, there is growing concern over the erosion of national identity and the weakening of citizenship values among young people (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2021). History education, when effectively taught, serves not merely as a recollection of past events but as a transformative tool for cultivating a shared national consciousness and fostering civic responsibility.

History education refers to the structured teaching and learning of past human events, ideas, cultures, and institutions within an educational setting. It involves more than the memorization of dates and facts; it is a pedagogical process aimed at developing learners' critical thinking, moral reasoning, and understanding of social and political dynamics over time. According to Ajayi (2022), history education "fosters analytical competencies, historical consciousness, and a sense of temporal perspective that are vital for national cohesion and civic engagement" (p. 64). It helps learners contextualize current national and global issues by understanding their historical roots, thereby equipping them to become informed and active citizens by having a sense of national identity.



National identity is the sense of a collective belonging to a nation-state, characterized by shared values, history, symbols, and aspirations. It forms part of an individual's self-concept that is derived from their perceived membership in a national group (Smith, 2021). National identity is not static; it is socially constructed and maintained through cultural narratives, institutions, and especially education. Schools, through subjects like history, serve as critical sites for inculcating the idea of nationhood, unity, and shared destiny among diverse ethnic and social groups. National identity encompasses a sense of belonging, loyalty, and emotional attachment to one's nation while citizenship values refer to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for responsible civic engagement (Hoskins, 2022).

Citizenship values refer to the attitudes, norms, and behaviours that promote responsible participation in democratic life. These include respect for the rule of law, tolerance for diversity, commitment to public good, civic responsibility, and engagement in governance processes. As noted by Hoskins (2022), citizenship education aims to cultivate individuals who are not only legally recognized members of a state but also active contributors to its political and social well-being. History education contributes to this goal by exposing learners to civic struggles, the evolution of democratic institutions, and the consequences of civic apathy.

These constructs are not inherited; they are learned—often in formal education settings where history plays a pivotal role. Through narratives of independence, social movements, and national milestones, history helps students connect with their heritage, appreciate diversity, and internalize democratic principles (Boadu, 2020). Moreover, in multicultural and multi-ethnic societies, history education has the unique capacity to bridge divisions by promoting inclusive national narratives that transcend ethnic and religious boundaries (Obi-Ani & Ogbu, 2023).

In recent decades, history education in Nigeria has faced systemic neglect. Following its controversial removal from the basic education curriculum in 2007 and the integration of its content into a broader subject called "Social Studies," the teaching of history experienced a dramatic decline in schools (Oyetade, 2020). This decision led to a generational

gap in historical knowledge and national consciousness among young Nigerians. Although history was reintroduced into the basic education curriculum in 2019, the impact of its absence is still evident in students' low enrollment in history at the senior secondary and tertiary levels (Ibrahim & Ogunyemi, 2023).

Moreover, many schools lack qualified history teachers, adequate instructional materials, and institutional support for teaching the subject effectively. In rural areas, history is either taught by non-specialists or omitted entirely from the timetable. Compounding the problem is the politicization of historical content, where selective or ethnocentric narratives are promoted at the expense of national unity (Obi-Ani & Ogbu, 2023). The overall outcome is a fragile historical consciousness among young people who are increasingly disconnected from the country's foundational ideals.

However, despite its potential, history education in many countries remains undervalued, poorly taught, or politically manipulated, weakening its capacity to shape civic-minded and nationally conscious citizens. This position paper argues that history education must be intentionally leveraged to promote national identity and citizenship values, calling for curriculum reforms, teacher training, and policy support to ensure its effectiveness.

2.0 The Urgency of Promoting National Identity and Citizenship Values

The urgency of promoting national identity and citizenship values through history education cannot be overstated, particularly in Nigeria's current socio-political climate. The country is grappling with multiple existential threats: political instability, ethnic and religious intolerance, secessionist agitations, and widespread civic apathy. Public trust in democratic institutions has declined, and participation in civic life such as voting, community service, or peaceful protest has weakened, especially among the youth (Uche & Nwafor, 2022).

Cultural erosion, fueled by globalization and digital media, has also led to a diminishing sense of national pride and identity. Young people increasingly align with global pop culture or ethnic affiliations, with little understanding of Nigeria's historical evolution,

democratic struggles, or national heroes. According to Babalola and Olaniyan (2022), this disconnect fosters "a growing indifference to the values of unity, tolerance, and civic duty" (p. 39).

In this context, history education serves as a strategic tool for national integration and civic renewal. By teaching the shared experiences that bind citizens together—such as the anti-colonial struggles, the civil war, and the founding of the republic—history can foster a more cohesive national identity. Furthermore, by exposing students to constitutional developments, landmark protests, and key policy reforms, history can ignite a sense of civic responsibility and agency in the younger generation.

3.0 The Main Arguments

A. History Education Fosters National Consciousness and Unity

One of the most significant roles of history education is its capacity to instill national consciousness and unity. Through structured lessons on the origins, struggles, and achievements of a nation, students gain a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Historical narratives especially those that highlight collective achievements like independence struggles, constitutional development, and post-colonial reconstruction serve as unifying forces across ethnic and regional divides.

For instance, the teaching of Nigeria's independence movement and the sacrifices made by nationalists such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and Ahmadu Bello enables students to appreciate the historical foundations of national unity. These figures, often emphasized in history curricula, symbolize patriotism, dialogue, and commitment to a common cause (Ibrahim & Ogunyemi, 2023). Similarly, national symbols like the Nigerian flag, anthem, and coat of arms derive meaning from historical events and are taught in schools as part of a nation-building project.

According to Boadu (2020), history instruction "encourages a collective memory that links present citizens with a shared past, which is critical for national integration" (p. 22). By connecting students to the country's heritage, history education reinforces a sense of unity amidst diversity—a key goal in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria.

B. History Cultivates Civic Awareness and Responsibility

Beyond fostering identity, history education also cultivates civic awareness and responsibility by equipping students with knowledge of political institutions, democratic ideals, and the rights and duties of citizenship. By examining past governance systems, revolutions, reforms, and civic struggles, students develop critical insights into the principles of justice, equity, and good governance.

History classes often cover content such as the emergence of democratic rule, constitutional changes, and landmark judicial decisions, all of which form the bedrock of citizenship education. For example, lessons on Nigeria's transitions between military and civilian regimes provide students with an understanding of democratic fragility and the importance of active citizen engagement. As Hoskins (2022) notes, "History education is essential in developing the kind of reflective civic engagement that democratic societies require" (p. 225).

Furthermore, history provides a platform to discuss civic values such as the rule of law, human rights, and political participation. Historical case studies like the Aba Women's Riot (1929), the anti-colonial protests, and post-independence civil rights movements reveal how ordinary citizens have historically challenged injustice and shaped governance. These lessons help students recognize their agency in democratic processes and encourage them to be informed and active citizens (Obi-Ani & Ogbu, 2023).

C. History Combats Ignorance, Stereotypes, and Tribalism

In a culturally diverse and often polarized nation, history education plays a crucial role in dismantling ignorance, prejudice, and tribalism. The selective transmission of historical knowledge or its outright absence can lead to ethnocentrism and the spread of stereotypes. However, when history is taught inclusively, it exposes students to the interwoven stories of different ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, thereby promoting tolerance and mutual respect.

Through multi-perspective historical narratives, students learn that national development has been a

collective effort involving all groups. For instance, the integration of histories of Northern empires (e.g., Kanem-Bornu), Yoruba city-states, and Igbo republican societies reveals the richness and contributions of different regions to the making of modern Nigeria (Ajayi, 2022). Such exposure corrects misconceptions and counters the narrative that one group has been more instrumental or dominant in national history.

Moreover, history exposes the dangers of ethnically motivated conflicts, authoritarian rule, and genocides. Teaching about the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), the Rwandan Genocide, or the apartheid era in South Africa, offers critical lessons on the destructive potential of ethnic hatred and the necessity of national reconciliation. As Babalola and Olaniyan (2022) argue, “history education can function as a social vaccine against the toxins of bigotry and exclusion” (p. 40).

D. Quality Teaching of History Builds Informed Future Leaders

Effective teaching methodologies in history such as storytelling, debates, simulations, and project-based learning do more than impart knowledge; they develop analytical, empathetic, and responsible individuals who are prepared to lead. These pedagogies bring history to life and make its civic lessons tangible for students.

For example, when students engage in reenactments of historical debates, analyze primary documents, or investigate local historical events, they learn to assess evidence, consider multiple viewpoints, and draw reasoned conclusions. These are the very skills needed in leadership and public decision-making. According to Uche and Nwafor (2022), participatory approaches in history instruction “nurture leadership potential by cultivating critical inquiry, problem-solving, and ethical reasoning” (p. 60).

However, for such pedagogies to be effective, teachers must be adequately trained not only in content but in value-driven instruction. Many history educators currently lack both the professional development and institutional support needed to transform the classroom into a space for civic learning. Ajayi (2022) emphasizes that “training teachers to teach values not just dates and facts—must be a national priority if history is to shape the

next generation of responsible citizens” (p. 67). Therefore, any reform agenda must prioritize the capacity-building of teachers and the integration of active learning strategies in history classrooms.

4.0 Counterarguments and Rebuttals

A. History is Outdated and Irrelevant in the Digital Age

A common critique of history education is that it is outdated and holds little relevance in today’s rapidly evolving, technology-driven world. Critics argue that the digital economy prioritizes science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, rendering the humanities—particularly history—less valuable for economic advancement and job readiness. From this perspective, history is seen as a nostalgic discipline that merely recounts past events with little practical application.

However, this view overlooks the transferable skills and critical capacities that history education cultivates. According to Adekunle and Oyelere (2022), history “develops analytical reasoning, problem-solving, and interpretive skills that are essential in all professional fields, including law, public policy, and media” (p. 44). In fact, employers increasingly value graduates who can think critically, write coherently, and understand complex social systems—competencies that history education fosters.

Moreover, in a world marked by misinformation, historical literacy has become more crucial than ever. Understanding the historical context of current events (e.g., political conflicts, pandemics, or social movements) is vital for informed citizenship and responsible digital engagement. As Hoskins (2022) aptly puts it, “History is not about the past; it is about understanding the present and shaping the future” (p. 228).

B. History is Boring and Non-engaging for Students

Another frequent criticism is that history is a boring subject, often taught through rote memorization of dates, names, and events without relevance to students’ lives. This perception, unfortunately, stems from outdated instructional practices and rigid curricula that fail to leverage the

subject's narrative and exploratory potential.

The rebuttal here lies not in the content of history but in the pedagogy used to deliver it. When history is taught using interactive and learner-centered methods such as storytelling, role-playing, debates, multimedia documentaries, and inquiry-based projects, it becomes an exciting and immersive learning experience. As Boadu (2020) asserts, “the problem is not with the discipline itself, but with the failure to adapt teaching approaches to contemporary learners’ needs and interests” (p. 25).

Incorporating local history and allowing students to explore their community’s past can also increase engagement and a sense of ownership over historical narratives. A student who investigates the founding of their village, the impact of colonial roads, or the legacy of local heroes is more likely to find meaning in the study of history. Thus, the solution is not to eliminate history but to reimagine how it is taught (Obi-Ani & Ogbu, 2023).

C. History Education is Politically Biased or Ethnocentric

Some critics argue that history education can be manipulated to promote political propaganda or ethnocentric narratives that distort truth and reinforce division. In postcolonial societies like Nigeria, selective retelling of events such as downplaying the contributions of certain ethnic groups or exaggerating the heroism of others has historically bred resentment and mistrust among learners.

While this concern is valid, the remedy lies in curriculum reform and the inclusion of multi-perspective narratives not the abandonment of history education altogether. A well-rounded history curriculum should draw on diverse sources, include voices from different regions and ethnicities, and critically evaluate contentious events. As Babalola and Olaniyan (2022) emphasize, “inclusive history education promotes critical engagement with national narratives and nurtures tolerance by highlighting common struggles and shared destinies” (p. 42).

Moreover, teaching historical thinking skills such as sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration—empowers students to detect bias and assess the

credibility of historical accounts. This turns students into independent thinkers who are less susceptible to manipulation. Ibrahim and Ogunyemi (2023) note that “rather than avoiding controversial topics, history education should embrace them as opportunities for civic dialogue and critical thinking” (p. 109).

D. History Offers no Tangible Economic Value

In countries with high youth unemployment and limited economic opportunities, some policymakers and parents question the economic viability of studying history. They argue that history does not lead directly to lucrative careers and is therefore a poor investment of educational resources.

This narrow view of education fails to recognize the broader role of history in preparing students for leadership, governance, communication, and civic responsibility. Graduates of history often excel in careers in public service, journalism, education, law, cultural preservation, and diplomacy. Additionally, history contributes to nation-building and conflict prevention—critical assets in fragile states.

As Uche and Nwafor (2022) assert, “while history may not yield immediate financial returns, its long-term value lies in nurturing enlightened citizens and ethical leaders who can manage national resources wisely and uphold democratic values” (p. 63). In essence, the economic argument against history education disregards its role in cultivating the human and social capital essential for sustainable development.

5.0 Conclusion

In an era marked by political fragmentation, cultural erosion, and civic disengagement, the urgent revitalization of history education cannot be overstated. This paper has argued forcefully that history education plays a pivotal role in fostering national consciousness, cultivating civic responsibility, combating tribalism, and preparing informed, ethical leaders. Far from being outdated or irrelevant, history when taught effectively is a transformative tool for nation-building, peacekeeping, and democratic consolidation.

To harness this potential, a concerted effort must be made to reform the history curriculum to reflect

inclusive, accurate, and engaging narratives. Teacher training programs should be restructured to equip educators not only with factual knowledge but with the pedagogical skills necessary to inspire critical thinking and moral reflection in learners. Furthermore, governments and education policymakers must prioritize history education by allocating adequate funding, integrating it meaningfully into national development strategies, and resisting attempts to politicize or dilute its content.

History is not merely a record of the past it is a moral compass for the present and a blueprint for the future. A nation that sidelines its history deprives its youth of the wisdom to navigate complexity and the courage to shape a just society. Indeed, a nation that ignores its history risks losing its soul.

6.0 Recommendations

- i. Governments and educational policymakers should reinstate history as a core subject and make history a compulsory subject at all levels of education to ensure sustained civic learning and identity formation.
- ii. Curriculum designers should adopt a balanced and inclusive approach that reflects the diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds of the nation to foster unity and mutual respect.
- iii. History teaching should be intentionally infused with citizenship education to cultivate democratic values, civic responsibility, and active participation in national development.
- iv. Professional development programs should be provided to equip teachers with the pedagogical skills to teach history in engaging, critical, and reflective ways that inspire civic engagement.
- v. Schools and teachers should leverage technology and media by utilizing digital tools, documentaries, and interactive platforms to make history education more appealing and relevant to contemporary learners.
- vi. Schools should partner with museums, historical sites, and community elders to enrich historical understanding through experiential

learning and oral history projects.

- vii. National education policies must prioritize history education, allocate adequate funding, and implement monitoring mechanisms to ensure effective delivery and outcomes.

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