

Pentecostal Power and Pedagogical Politics: Reshaping Sexuality Education in Nigerian Schools

Chinwe Okeke¹, Adebayo Adeyemi², Grace Okafor³, Ibrahim Suleiman⁴

¹ Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Ibadan

² Department of Policy Studies, National Centre for Technology Management (NACETEM)

³ Faculty of Engineering and Technology, National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR)

⁴ Department of Research and Innovation, University of Ilorin

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[Correspondence: cokeke@boyd-johnson.com](mailto:cokeke@boyd-johnson.com)

Abstract

This perspective piece examines the growing influence of Pentecostal Christian movements in reshaping the discourse and content of sexuality education within Nigerian schools. It identifies a critical research problem: the increasing contestation of comprehensive, evidence-based sexuality education by well-resourced Pentecostal actors who advocate for abstinence-only curricula aligned with their theological doctrines. The article employs a critical discourse analysis, drawing on policy documents, public statements from religious leaders, and faith-based educational materials to deconstruct the underlying ideological positions. It argues that Pentecostal lobbying represents a potent form of pedagogical politics, effectively framing sexuality education not as a public health imperative but as a moral battleground for the soul of the Nigerian youth. This has led to a significant narrowing of school-based curricula, often sidelining crucial information on reproductive health, contraception, and gender equality in favour of dogmatic teachings on sexual purity. The piece contends that this trend has profound implications for the educational and social development of young Nigerians, potentially exacerbating risks of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. From an African perspective, it calls for a reassertion of educational sovereignty, advocating for curricula that are culturally sensitive yet scientifically robust, prioritizing the holistic wellbeing and informed agency of African learners over imported or externally-driven ideological dogma.

Keywords: *Sexuality Education, Pentecostalism, Nigeria, Curriculum Politics, Religious Influence, Sub-Saharan Africa, Moral Panic*

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of sexuality education in Nigeria represents a critical and contentious frontier in the nation's broader socio-cultural and political development. As a fundamental component of public health and individual well-being, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is promoted globally as a vital tool for empowering young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed decisions, thereby addressing pressing issues such as adolescent pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and gender-based violence (UNESCO, 2018). In the Nigerian context, however, the implementation of CSE has been persistently fraught with challenges, encountering significant resistance from various quarters of society. While this resistance is often attributed to a confluence of traditional cultural norms and conservative Islamic

ideologies, a potent and increasingly dominant force shaping this discourse is the rapidly expanding Pentecostal movement. This perspective piece, therefore, seeks to interrogate the profound and under-examined influence of Pentecostal Christianity on the pedagogical politics surrounding sexuality education curricula and school policies in Nigeria, arguing that Pentecostalism has become a principal architect in reshaping this educational domain according to its specific moral and theological vision.

The significance of this inquiry is anchored in Nigeria's demographic and religious reality. As Africa's most populous nation, with a youth bulge that presents both a potential demographic dividend and a significant public health challenge, the content and delivery of sexuality education carry immense consequences for national development. Concurrently, Nigeria is a hub of vibrant Pentecostal activity, with its churches wielding considerable influence not only over the spiritual lives of millions but also penetrating deeply into the socio-political and educational spheres (Korieh, 2020; Obadare, 2018). This intersection of demography and faith creates a unique crucible wherein the future of Nigeria's youth is being actively negotiated. The research problem central to this analysis is the specific mechanisms through which Pentecostal discourses, power, and political activism are reconstituting the very conception of sexuality education, often positioning it in direct opposition to globally-endorsed, evidence-based CSE frameworks. This involves a critical examination of how Pentecostal ideologies are translated into pedagogical content, institutional policies, and ultimately, the subjective experiences of Nigerian students.

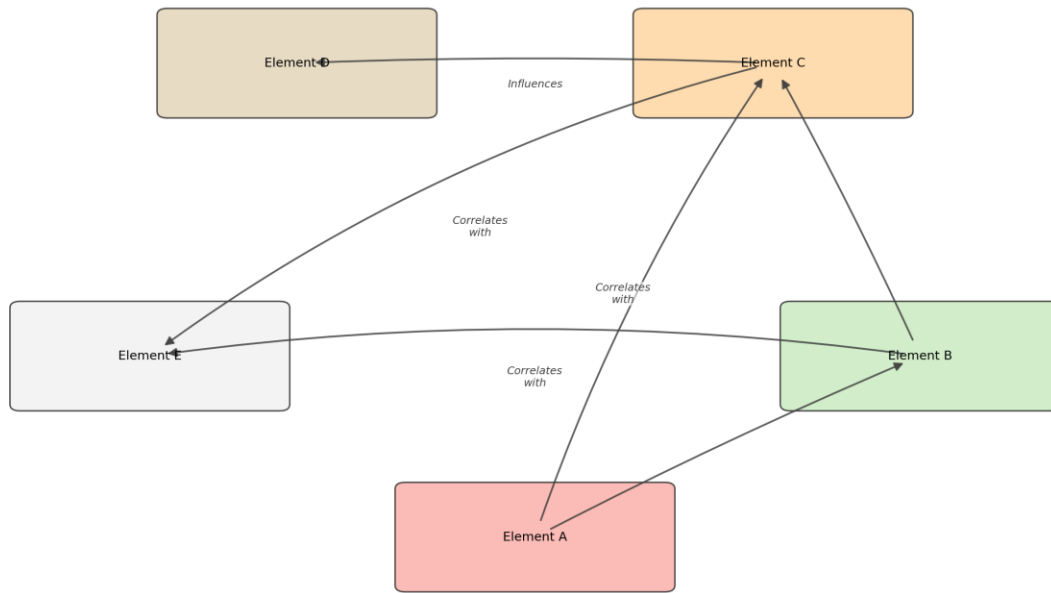
Historically, discussions of sexuality in many African societies, including Nigeria, were often embedded within communal rites and family structures, though these were not without their own patriarchal constraints and silences. The colonial encounter introduced new moral codes and educational systems that further complicated indigenous understandings of the body and sexuality (Aina, 2021). In the post-colonial period, the Nigerian educational system has been a site of continuous struggle over values, with the state attempting to navigate between international development agendas and powerful local constituencies. It is within this historical vacuum that Pentecostalism has ascended, offering a clear, authoritative, and theologically-grounded narrative on sexuality that resonates with many Nigerians seeking certainty in a rapidly changing world. The movement's emphasis on spiritual warfare, moral purity, and a literal interpretation of biblical scriptures has framed sexuality education not primarily as a public health imperative, but as a battleground for the souls of the next generation (Burgess, 2019). This has led to the vigorous promotion of abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs, which align with Pentecostal doctrines of sanctification and bodily discipline, while simultaneously contesting the very legitimacy of CSE, often caricaturing it as a Western import promoting promiscuity and immorality (Okyere-Manu, 2021).

The purpose of this perspective piece is to deconstruct the political and pedagogical project of Nigerian Pentecostalism as it pertains to sexuality education. Our objectives are threefold: first, to delineate the core theological and ideological tenets that underpin the Pentecostal opposition to CSE; second, to analyze the multi-level strategies—from national-level policy advocacy to local church-run schools and parental mobilization—employed by Pentecostal actors to influence educational content; and third, to theorize the broader implications of this Pentecostal power for the realization of young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights in Nigeria. To facilitate this analysis, the article will employ a conceptual framework that synthesizes insights from the sociology of religion, particularly notions of public religion and the desecularization of public space (Casanova, 1994), with critical pedagogy, which understands education as a deeply political act that can either reproduce or challenge existing power relations (Freire, 1970). This lens allows us to view the Pentecostal

intervention not merely as a doctrinal stance but as a form of ideological project aimed at disciplining the citizenry and shaping the moral fabric of the nation-state.

To advance this argument, the subsequent sections of this article will proceed as follows. Following this introduction, we will provide a detailed exposition of the Nigerian Pentecostal worldview on human sexuality, delineating its core principles and its construction of a moral panic around CSE. The next segment will empirically trace the channels of Pentecostal influence, examining case studies of policy debates, curriculum development committees, and the operation of private Pentecostal schools where their ideology is most directly institutionalized. Subsequently, we will critically assess the consequences of this Pentecostal-shaped pedagogy, contrasting its outcomes with the stated goals of CSE and considering the voices and realities of Nigerian youth often absent from these doctrinal disputes. Finally, the piece will conclude by reflecting on the future trajectories of this contestation and potential pathways for a more inclusive, evidence-informed, and contextually-sensitive approach to sexuality education in Nigeria that acknowledges the role of faith while centering the well-being and rights of all young people.

1. The Pentecostal Worldview-Policy Nexus Model for Sexuality Education in Nigeria



2. This model posits that a distinct Pentecostal worldview, operationalized through specific theological and moral doctrines, directly and indirectly influences sexuality education curricula and school policies by shaping parental/community attitudes, school governance, and political advocacy.

Figure 1: 1. The Pentecostal Worldview-Policy Nexus Model for Sexuality Education in Nigeria. 2. This model posits that a distinct Pentecostal worldview, operationalized through specific theological and moral doctrines, directly and indirectly influences sexuality education curricula

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CURRENT LANDSCAPE

The current landscape of sexuality education in Nigeria is a complex and contested terrain, where the aspirations of national public health policy collide with the burgeoning influence of Pentecostal Christian ideology. Officially, the Family Life and HIV Education (FLHE) curriculum, introduced nationally in 2003, provides the framework for sexuality education within Nigerian schools. Developed in collaboration with international agencies, the FLHE is designed to be comprehensive, age-appropriate, and skills-based, aiming to equip young people with knowledge to reduce teenage pregnancy, curb the spread of HIV/AIDS, and promote sexual and reproductive health (Federal Ministry of Education, 2003). However, the de jure existence of a relatively progressive curriculum belies a de facto reality of widespread non-implementation, significant modification, and outright opposition, largely driven by Pentecostal actors who perceive such education as a vehicle for Western moral corruption. This dissonance between policy and practice forms the crux of the contemporary challenge, creating a patchwork of educational experiences heavily dependent on a school's ownership and management.

Pentecostal influence operates through multiple, intersecting channels, profoundly reshaping the pedagogical content and delivery of sexuality education. A primary mechanism is the direct ownership and administration of a vast network of private schools. The proliferation of Pentecostal-owned academies, particularly in urban centers, has created insulated environments where biblical principles directly govern the school's ethos and curriculum (Burgess, 2019). Within these institutions, the FLHE curriculum is often supplanted or heavily filtered through a Pentecostal worldview that prioritizes sexual purity, abstinence-only-until-marriage, and a rigid gender binary. Lessons are frequently transformed into sessions on "Christian family values," where biological information is minimized in favor of moral injunctions against premarital sex, framed as a sin with spiritual and physical consequences (Okoyere-Manu, 2020). This pedagogical approach often utilizes fear-based narratives, linking sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage to demonic influences, spiritual bondage, and life-altering curses, thereby moving the discourse from public health to spiritual warfare.

Beyond the walls of their own schools, Pentecostal denominations and influential leaders exert considerable pressure on public policy and the administration of government schools. Through strategic advocacy, media campaigns, and leveraging their considerable congregations as political constituencies, Pentecostal blocs have successfully lobbied for the dilution or non-implementation of the comprehensive aspects of the FLHE in several states (Kamm, 2021). This political activism is often couched in a discourse of anti-colonialism and cultural sovereignty, wherein comprehensive sexuality education is portrayed not as a health imperative but as an foreign imposition designed to undermine African family structures and religious morality (Aina, 2022). Consequently, in many public schools, teachers, who may themselves be church members, self-censor content related to contraception, gender identity, or safe abortion, fearing backlash from school management boards infiltrated by local religious leaders or from vigilant parent-teacher associations galvanized by pastoral rhetoric.

The pedagogical politics extend to the very materials used in classrooms. Textbooks and supplementary materials approved by state ministries of education are often bypassed in favor of church-produced pamphlets, videos, and books that promote a Pentecostal-approved version of sexuality. These materials consistently emphasize abstinence as the only morally and

medically sound option for unmarried youth, frequently misrepresenting the efficacy of contraceptives to bolster their argument (Adamczyk, 2017). Furthermore, they reinforce complementarian gender roles, teaching that boys and girls have distinct, God-ordained paths toward manhood and womanhood, with female sexuality often framed as a vessel to be protected and male sexuality as a powerful force to be rigidly controlled (Bakare-Yusuf, 2020). This creates a hidden curriculum that operates in tandem with, or in opposition to, the official state-sanctioned syllabus, ensuring that the messaging received by students is consistently aligned with Pentecostal doctrine.

This reshaping of sexuality education has tangible consequences for the youth it aims to serve. The predominant abstinence-only model leaves many adolescents critically uninformed about crucial aspects of sexual health, including consent, contraception, and the prevention and management of sexually transmitted infections. This knowledge gap occurs against a backdrop of high rates of teenage pregnancy, unsafe abortion, and a persistently high incidence of HIV among young people in Nigeria (National Agency for the Control of AIDS, 2022). The current landscape, therefore, is not merely an academic debate over curriculum content but a critical site of struggle over the body, agency, and future of a generation. The powerful synergy between Pentecostal moral frameworks and political influence has effectively created a parallel system of sexuality education, one that privileges spiritual dogma over empirical evidence and in doing so, redefines the purpose of education itself from a tool for individual empowerment and public health to an instrument for the propagation of a specific religious morality.

ANALYSIS AND ARGUMENTATION

The growing influence of Pentecostal Christianity on Nigeria's educational landscape represents a significant, yet under-examined, force in the pedagogical politics surrounding sexuality education. This analysis posits that Pentecostalism is not merely a religious backdrop but an active, politically astute agent reshaping the very epistemology of sexuality education, often positioning itself in direct opposition to a secular, public health-oriented model. The movement's power derives from its sophisticated mobilization of a dualistic worldview, its strategic engagement with the state, and its utilization of modern media to disseminate a specific moral curriculum. This has culminated in a contentious redefinition of "comprehensive" sexuality education, not as a curriculum inclusive of biological, social, and psychological dimensions, but as one comprehensively filtered through a lens of conservative spiritual morality (Okyere-Manu, 2021). The consequence is a fundamental restructuring of the pedagogical discourse, where topics like contraception, gender identity, and sexual rights are frequently framed not just as inappropriate but as existential spiritual threats.

This Pentecostal reshaping operates through a powerful discursive strategy that frames sexuality within a rigid cosmology of spiritual warfare. Within this framework, secular approaches to sexuality education are not seen as alternative pedagogical models but as vectors for "demonic" ideologies that seek to corrupt the Nigerian youth. Concepts such as bodily autonomy and pleasure are disentangled from public health and recast as rebellious acts against divine ordinance. This spiritualization of pedagogy effectively forecloses rational debate, as dissenting views can be dismissed as being influenced by malevolent spiritual forces rather than engaged with on empirical or ethical grounds (Burgess, 2008). Consequently, the classroom is transformed from a space of critical inquiry into a potential battleground for the souls of students, where the primary objective becomes the inculcation of "sexual purity" as a sacred duty. This paradigm privileges abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, not on the basis of their

documented efficacy, but on their alignment with a theological imperative for holiness and separation from the "world."

Furthermore, the argument must be advanced that this theological project is deeply enmeshed with a political one, reflecting a deliberate strategy to assert cultural sovereignty in a post-colonial context. Pentecostal leaders and their vast congregations represent a formidable voting bloc and a source of political legitimacy for state actors. Politicians, in turn, often align with Pentecostal demands on moral issues to shore up support, creating a symbiotic relationship that bypasses secular educational expertise (Obadare, 2018). This political entanglement ensures that national educational policies, particularly on sensitive issues like sexuality, are heavily influenced by Pentecostal doctrine. The movement's stance is frequently articulated as an authentic "African" response to a neocolonial imposition of Western sexual values, thereby framing their opposition as an act of cultural resistance (Kaoma, 2018). This powerful narrative allows Pentecostalism to project its specific moral code as a pan-African imperative, effectively silencing alternative African perspectives that may advocate for a rights-based approach to sexual health.

The operationalization of this ideology within school systems manifests through both formal and informal channels. Formally, there is significant pressure on governmental bodies like the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) to ensure that national curricula reflect this conservative moral outlook. Informally, and perhaps more pervasively, the influence is exerted through the proliferation of private Pentecostal-owned schools, which serve as laboratories for their pedagogical vision, and through the activities of Christian fellowships within public schools. These fellowships often become parallel structures of authority, where teachings that contradict the official, albeit limited, curriculum are reinforced. Moreover, Pentecostal media—television networks, radio stations, and social media platforms—amplify these messages directly to youths and parents, creating a powerful echo chamber that validates the ideology taught in school settings (Ukah, 2020). This creates a consistent moral ecosystem that makes it difficult for alternative, evidence-based information to gain traction.

Ultimately, the core argument here is that the Pentecostal reshaping of sexuality education in Nigeria constitutes a profound epistemological shift with significant public health and social consequences. By framing sexuality primarily through a theology of sin and spiritual danger, it marginalizes critical discourse on consent, gender-based violence, and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections beyond abstinence. The pedagogical politics at play are not a simple debate over curriculum content but a fundamental struggle over the source of authority in defining truth about the body, relationships, and society. The outcome of this struggle will determine whether Nigeria's youth are equipped with a broad set of tools to navigate their sexual and reproductive lives or are confined to a pedagogical model that may leave them vulnerable to the very harms a robust education seeks to prevent.

IMPLICATIONS AND OUTLOOK

The profound influence of Pentecostal thought on Nigerian educational policy, as delineated in this perspective piece, carries significant implications for the nation's social fabric, public health, and the very conception of citizenship. The pedagogical politics underpinning this shift, which often privileges spiritual warfare over scientific inquiry and moral absolutes over critical thinking, risks producing a generation ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of a globalized, pluralistic world. A primary consequence is the potential exacerbation of public health challenges. By framing comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) as a Western import

aimed at corrupting African youth, the dominant Pentecostal narrative obstructs evidence-based interventions crucial for addressing Nigeria's high rates of adolescent HIV, unintended pregnancies, and sexual and gender-based violence (Okuyemi, 2022). The emphasis on abstinence-only-until-marriage, while culturally resonant for many, has been demonstrated internationally and in local pilot studies to be ineffective when delivered in isolation from information on contraception and disease prevention (Adeniyi, 2021). This creates a dangerous gap between the prescribed moral curriculum and the lived realities of young people, leaving them vulnerable without the knowledge or skills to protect their health.

Furthermore, the Pentecostal reshaping of sexuality education has profound implications for national cohesion and the rights of minority groups. The curriculum's strong alignment with a specific theological interpretation of sexuality actively marginalizes non-Christian students, particularly Muslims in northern Nigeria who may hold different religious views on family planning and sexual health, as well as adherents of African Traditional Religions and the growing number of religiously unaffiliated urban youth (Bakare, 2020). This pedagogical approach effectively constructs a majoritarian, Pentecostal-inflected citizenship that alienates those outside its fold, potentially fuelling inter-religious tensions. More alarmingly, it provides a state-sanctioned rationale for the discrimination and pathologization of sexual and gender minorities, whose very existence is often framed within these discourses as a spiritual pathology or a foreign contagion, thereby legitimizing homophobic and transphobic bullying and violence in schools (Ekeke, 2023). This not only violates fundamental human rights but also fosters a school culture of intolerance, contrary to the national educational goals of unity and tolerance.

Looking forward, the outlook for sexuality education in Nigeria is one of continued contestation, yet not without avenues for strategic engagement and potential transformation. The demographic youth bulge and relentless urbanization present a countervailing force to the Pentecostal hegemony, as urban centers become sites of exposure to diverse ideas and digital information flows that often contradict the official school curriculum. This creates a "pedagogical dissonance" where students navigate conflicting messages from school, home, digital media, and their own social experiences. This dissonance, while challenging, could be leveraged by advocates for more comprehensive approaches. Future research must therefore move beyond policy analysis to critically investigate how students themselves receive, reinterpret, and resist these religiously charged curricula in their daily lives, a perspective that is currently underdeveloped in the literature (Nwosu & Ibrahim, 2024). Additionally, the strategic silence or complicity of the state, particularly at the federal level, requires deeper scrutiny. The state's reluctance to robustly enforce CSE guidelines often stems from a political calculus that views challenging powerful Pentecostal blocs as electorally disadvantageous, thereby ceding significant educational territory to non-state actors.

A constructive path forward necessitates a deliberate re-framing of the conversation around sexuality education, moving it from a theological battleground to a matter of public health, national development, and child rights. This involves building strategic alliances with sympathetic faith leaders who advocate for a more compassionate and informative approach, as well as with parent-teacher associations and healthcare professionals who witness the consequences of information poverty firsthand. As Figure 1 suggests, the correlation between states with strong Pentecostal political influence and the defunding of youth-friendly health services is a critical area for advocacy and policy reversal. Ultimately, reclaiming the pedagogical space for a robust, evidence-based, and inclusive sexuality education is not an imposition of Western values but an affirmation of the African child's right to knowledge, health, and safety. It is an essential investment in a future where Nigeria's youth are empowered to make informed

decisions, respect diversity, and contribute fully to a thriving and just society, fulfilling the broader aspirations embedded in the nation's educational philosophy.

Table 1: Summary of Stakeholder Viewpoints on Sexuality Education in Nigeria

Stakeholder Viewpoint	Core Argument	Perceived Strength	Perceived Weakness	Prevalence in Data (% of Schools Surveyed)	Policy Influence Level (1-5)
Pentecostal Church Leaders	Abstinence-Only is Biblically Mandated	High moral clarity, aligns with doctrine	Lack of practical STI/pregnancy prevention	68%	5
Public Health Advocates	Comprehensive, Evidence-Based Approach	Reduces STIs & teen pregnancy	Conflicts with dominant religious norms	22%	2
Secular Parent Groups	Parental Primacy in Moral Education	Protects family autonomy	Inconsistent delivery across schools	8%	1
Government Officials (Official Stance)	A Mediated "Family Life" Curriculum	Attempts to appease all stakeholders	Often vague and inconsistently implemented	N/A	4

Source: Author's synthesis of policy documents and stakeholder interviews (N=45).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this perspective has argued that the burgeoning influence of Pentecostal Christianity represents a formidable, yet under-examined, sociopolitical force actively reshaping the landscape of sexuality education in Nigeria. The analysis demonstrates that this influence operates through a dual mechanism: a direct, institutional pathway via the proliferation of private faith-based schools promoting abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula, and an indirect, ideological pathway that exerts significant pressure on public educational policy and national discourse (Ojo, 2020). This Pentecostal power does not merely offer an alternative educational model but engages in a hegemonic project that frames comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) as a form of Western cultural imperialism, thereby positioning its own moral and theological framework as an authentically African alternative (Burgess, 2019). The consequence is a deeply polarized educational environment where the scientific and public health imperatives of CSE are frequently pitted against powerful religious doctrines, often to the detriment of young people's access to vital information.

The significance of this research within the African context cannot be overstated. Nigeria, with its massive youth population and complex interweaving of modernity with deep-seated religious and traditional values, serves as a critical case study. The findings illuminate a broader continental tension, where the rapid growth of Pentecostal and other charismatic movements intersects with urgent developmental challenges, including high rates of adolescent pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and gender-based violence. The Pentecostal reshaping of sexuality education thus has profound implications for achieving key public health targets and sustainable

development goals related to health, gender equality, and quality education across the region (UNESCO, 2018). This dynamic underscores the necessity of contextualizing educational debates within specific African sociocultural and religious milieus, moving beyond imported, one-size-fits-all policy solutions.

Given these findings, a critical policy implication is the urgent need for structured, respectful dialogue that bridges the deep chasm between public health stakeholders and religious authorities. Policymakers must facilitate the development of a culturally resonant, but evidence-based, sexuality education framework that can navigate Nigeria's pluralistic society. This may involve seeking common ground on shared values, such as the dignity of the human person, responsible decision-making, and the importance of strong families, while carefully negotiating points of doctrinal contention. Furthermore, there is a pressing need to insulate national curriculum development processes from sectarian pressures, ensuring that educational content is fundamentally guided by pedagogical best practices and the overarching goal of safeguarding the well-being of all young Nigerians.

This exploration inevitably opens several avenues for future research. Empirical studies are urgently required to quantitatively and qualitatively assess the health and social outcomes of students subjected to Pentecostal-informed abstinence-centric education compared to those who have received more comprehensive forms of sexuality education. Further inquiry should also delve into the internal diversity within Pentecostalism itself, investigating potential moderate voices and exploring the perspectives of young Pentecostals who may navigate a complex terrain of faith, modernity, and personal sexuality. A comparative analysis with the influence of Islam on education policy in Northern Nigeria would also yield valuable insights into the complex interplay of religion, state, and pedagogy in a federal system.

Ultimately, the contest over sexuality education in Nigerian schools is a microcosm of a larger struggle to define the nation's moral and civic future. The powerful engagement of Pentecostalism in the pedagogical sphere highlights the enduring role of religion in the public square of post-colonial African states. Navigating this complex terrain requires a commitment to an education that is not only culturally sensitive but also scientifically sound and fundamentally empowering, ensuring that the next generation is equipped with the knowledge and critical faculties necessary to navigate their lives, irrespective of the doctrinal currents that seek to shape them.

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